“Good Samaritan” Paradigms in Old Testament Narratives

Demonstrating the Value of Old Testament Narratives as Paradigmatic Illustrations of the Torah Laws of the Socially Marginalized

by

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Abstract

This thesis presents three Old Testament narratives as paradigmatic illustrations of Old Testament laws that address Israel’s treatment of its socially marginalized population. With a specific focus on the laws of the foreigner, widow, and fatherless, the respective narratives of Jethro and Moses (Exod 2:11-22), Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1-4), and David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9) are examined through a literary analysis. As a result, the characters Jethro, Boaz, and David are observed, not fulfilling the letter of the laws of the foreigner, widow, and fatherless, but nevertheless satisfying the concerns of those laws through their abundant and generous protection, provision, and inclusion, of the foreigner, widow, and fatherless. Just as the story of the good Samaritan was told by Jesus to illustrate a point of Torah law, so too these narratives function illustratively of Torah laws, demonstrating how the Christian may “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).
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Chapter 1
Introduction

While the Church maintains that its Christian Scripture, the Bible, is authoritative and instructional, there is little consensus regarding the Church’s use and application of the laws within the Torah division of the Bible. The fundamental question that Christians have wrestled with is: “How does Torah law apply to the Christian?” More specifically, some have asked how they can negotiate the very real tension between what Bahnsen has called “this revealed will of God and the struggle for obedience in the concrete moment before a living God.”¹ For those who embrace both Testaments, and therefore Torah law, as Christian Scripture and as authoritative for directing one’s life, this tension persists.

This thesis sets out to examine one aspect of this tension. It will focus specifically on the Old Testament laws that address Israel’s treatment of the socially marginalized and propose that embedded within the Old Testament itself are narratives which flesh out the intention of Old Testament laws. It will argue further that these narratives function as paradigms that Christians can use to help them understand the original and contemporary meaning of the laws.

The thesis will begin by outlining three distinctive views to Old Testament law prevalent in and since the nineteenth century, as illustrative of the debate, and will argue for the middle position which continues to value Old Testament law as an ethical resource for the contemporary community of faith. It will briefly discuss the issue of social marginalization in ancient Israel to provide the cultural context for what follows. It will then narrow the focus of the discussion to the laws of the marginalized and present in three separate chapters three Old Testament narratives that can function as paradigmatic illustrations of the various aspects of the Old Testament.

Testament laws about the foreigner, the widow or the orphan. Three narratives have been specifically chosen to illustrate Old Testament laws about the socially marginalized which as my previous study showed,² all center around the themes of protection, provision, and inclusion. Each narrative shows a person who is socially marginalized receiving care from another person that expresses itself in practical expressions of protection, provision, and inclusion. In this way they are illustrative of the laws of the socially marginalized.

A literary analysis of the narratives of Jethro and Moses (Exod 2:11-22), Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1-4) and David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9) will show how these texts model attitudes and behaviours toward foreigners, widows and orphans respectively, that are mandated in Old Testament law. Specifically, the characters Jethro, Boaz, and David are held out as models, who do not necessarily fulfill the letter of all the laws of the foreigner, widow, and fatherless, but nevertheless satisfy the concerns of those laws through their abundant and generous protection, provision, or inclusion, of the foreigner, widow, and fatherless. Thus these individuals in their narrative contexts become legal paradigms for Christian behaviour towards the socially marginalized in their community. So just as the story of the good Samaritan was told by Jesus to illustrate a point of Torah law to a lawyer, this thesis will argue that these Old Testament narratives illustrate how the Christian should also “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).³

1 Procedure

Although the three narratives that have been chosen illustrate the intent and outworkings of Old Testament laws about the socially marginalized, they each highlight a particular type of marginalized person in ancient Israelite society and as such they will be analysed separately.

³ The New International Version is used throughout.
In Chapter Two, the story of “Jethro and Moses (Exod 2:15-22),” will be analysed using a narrative critical approach, highlighting generally the themes of protection, provision, and inclusion as they relate to Old Testament laws concerning the foreigner or outsider and specifically laws which this story illustrates. Laws exemplified by this story include: Exod 22:21, 23:9 (Protection), Lev 19:9, 23:22, 25:26; Deut 26:11-13 (Provision), Lev 19:33-34; Num 15:14-16, 15:26-31 (Inclusion).

Similarly in Chapter Three, the story of “Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 1-4),” will be studied with a view to highlighting aspects of protection, provision, and inclusion of a widow. It will be argued that this narrative serves as an illustration of what the laws concerning the socially marginalized look like when they are practically applied. Illustrated by this story are the intent and potential expressions of such laws as: Exod 22:22-24; Deut 24:17, 27:19 (Protection), Lev 19:9-10, 23:22 (Provision), Deut 16:9-12, 13-15 (Inclusion).

In Chapter Four, the story of “David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9),” will be studied with a view to underlining the themes of protection, provision, and inclusion of an orphan. The intent of the Torah laws, Exod 22:22-24; Deut 24:17 (Protection), Deut 10:17-19, 14:28, 26:11-13 (Provision), Deut 16:9-12, 13-15 (Inclusion), is illustrated by this story.

Chapter Five will conclude the thesis by tying the conclusions of each chapter together with a summary analysis. It will show how these Old Testament narratives serve as illustrations of Old Testament laws and explore their implications and applicability for the contemporary Christian community.
2 Three Approaches to Old Testament Law

Although Christians in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have approached Old Testament law in a variety of ways, three basic approaches have emerged: the theonomist approach, the dispensational approach, and a middle position situated between the theonomist and dispensational approaches. The theonomist view on the one side which advocates obedience to the laws is defended by Greg Bahnsen; the Dispensational view on the other side which limits the application of the laws to Israel alone was promoted by J. N. Darby and his followers, and between them are a number of middle approaches found in the writings of Emil Brunner, Waldemar Janzen, Gordon Wenham and Brevard Childs.

The theonomist position derives its name from two Greek words, theos meaning God and nomos meaning law. As the name suggests, theonomists are concerned with the law of God and its authority. They maintain that the laws as they are stated in the Torah remain as authoritative today as they did for ancient Israel. Theonomist Greg Bahnsen, a mid-twentieth century Reformed Theologian, states the matter this way: “Our obligation to keep the law of God cannot be judged by any extrascriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements (when properly interpreted) are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.”

He argues that it is incumbent upon the leaders of every nation state to ensure that the laws in Torah are adhered to in all areas of life, such as, for example, education or economics. Even the penalties for committing legal infractions of Torah law are to be carried out as the Torah law stipulates. Indeed Bahnsen declares: “Civil magistrates in all ages and places are obligated to conduct their offices as ministers of God, avenging divine wrath against criminals.”

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thus represents an approach to Old Testament ethics that views the Torah laws as directly applicable today.

While Bahnsen advocates that the Old Testament be applied directly to all realms of life from civil authority to personal conduct, he is quite vague in specifying how this is to be accomplished in a contemporary context. One specific example he makes is in reference to the law of clean and unclean meat:

Observation of such laws (for example, distinguishing unclean from clean meats) was but symbol of separation from worldly customs. All meats are now deemed clean (Mark 7:9; Acts 10:14-15), yet God’s people are still obligated to separate themselves from worldliness (Rev. 12:1-2) and union with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-17). How was holy separation accomplished, according to Leviticus 20? “You shall therefore keep my statutes and all mine ordinances and do them” (v. 22).6

Thus for Bahnsen, if a Christian was to marry a person who is not a Christian, he or she would essentially violate the laws that stipulate abstention from eating unclean animals, as he would view non-Christians as types of unclean animals. Typically however, Bahnsen does not specify how laws should be kept, preferring to simply argue that they should in fact be observed: “The righteousness of God’s kingdom, the way of righteousness, holiness and sainthood, our separation from the world, and the good, well-pleasing, perfect will of God, all require that our behavior conform to the standard of God’s commandments as revealed once and for all in the Old Testament.”7

On the other end of the spectrum is Dispensationalism, a theology that began with the Plymouth Brethren’s founder J. N. Darby in the nineteenth century. He reasoned that God dealt differently with people in the different times, or dispensations, of history. Specifically he argued that God

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7 Bahnsen, *By This Standard* 113.
dealt with Israel through the law, during what he named “the dispensation of the law,” and with the Church through grace, during “the dispensation of the Spirit.” He stated further that, “the moral teaching of the Old Testament law was only intended for, and relevant to, the dispensation before Christ and will be the standard again in the millennial age when Christ reigns on earth among a converted Jewish nation.” In contrast to Theonomy which approaches the Old Testament law as being binding upon society unless the New Testament specifically nullifies it, Dispensationalism maintains that “only those laws affirmed by the New Testament are binding.” Norman L. Geisler, a prominent yet more moderate modern proponent of Dispensationalism denies the use of the law as a “normative authority,” yet unlike the more radical Dispensationalists does not discard the use of the law all together. For Geisler the law still has relevance but only as a source from which to draw “moral principles as exemplified in the Old Testament” which can then be applied.

A number of Christian scholars advocate approaches to the Old Testament law that sit on the spectrum between the ‘all or nothing’ approaches described above. The Divine Imperative approach of mid-twentieth century theologian Emil Brunner had a significant influence in the field of Old Testament law and ethics. For Brunner the Divine will of God is encapsulated in the first commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Deut 6:5), which also includes “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31). Thus Brunner’s ethic, or ‘Divine Imperative’ is to love. The role the Old Testament

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10 Wright, Old Testament Ethics, 400.
12 Wright, Old Testament Ethics, 402.
13 Wright, Old Testament Ethics, 401.
laws play in Brunner’s ethic is as examples or illustrations of what it meant to love in a given particular biblical context. Thus Brunner states: “All other commandments, statutes and ordinances are characterized as technique, as a means of implementing the love commandment. They illustrate, at a given time and under given circumstances, what it means to love.”15 The laws remain pertinent and necessary to the Christian today as a “sub-ethical”16 guide, or natural law, with regards to ordering one’s life toward maintaining a stable community17 and are “only indirectly the will of God for us.”18 Ultimately the laws are a manifestation of the Divine Imperative to love as are all the commandments in the Bible “whether those of the Decalogue or Sermon on the Mount…(they all) form part of the revelation of the Divine will.”19 As Brunner’s middle position suggests, as one extends love to God and to others one is fulfilling the ethical will of God.

Waldemar Janzen, author of Old Testament ethics and emeritus professor at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, views Brunner’s “Divine Imperative” approach as reductionist in the sense that the ‘love principle’ becomes “a self-contained and self-authenticating ethical maxim…apart from the story that gave rise to it.”20 As such, Janzen proposes the need for a middle level between the ethical will of God to love and the application of ethics. When Jesus was asked, “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29), he replied not with, “You know very well”, but with the story of the good Samaritan “acknowledging the legitimate need, at least in that case, of a ‘middle level’ of ethical imagination.”21 This middle level of ethical imagination

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16 Brunner, The Divine Imperative, 141.
18 Brunner, The Divine Imperative, 142.
20 Janzen, Old Testament Ethics, 70.
21 Janzen, Old Testament Ethics, 71.
functions ethically through the medium of a “story-shaped paradigm.” Thus through the story of the good Samaritan Jesus answers the lawyer’s and our question, “who is my neighbour?” This middle level of “paradigmatic images” is found canonically in various genres such as narrative, law, proverbs, and prophecy. The Old Testament laws specifically, Janzen explains, “are firmly embedded in Israel’s story account of her faith and interpreted by the framework of meaning inherent in that story.” In other words, Janzen proposes that it is the story of Israel which gave rise to the law and as such, ethical principles of application are not to be gleaned from the law, because the laws are “the shorthand formulations of ethical values and imperatives emerging from a particular story” of Israel. Thus for Janzen the biblical narratives are not to be understood as illustrative of Torah law so much as Torah law is to be understood as a commentary on the biblical narratives.

Unlike Brunner who sees the Old Testament laws as expressions of the first commandment of love, and Janzen who sees them as summaries of values that have arisen from Israel’s story, British scholar and Professor of Old Testament at the University of Gloucestershire Gordon Wenham recognizes the law as representative of the minimum ethical requirement. Wenham argues that while the prescriptions of the law standardize behaviour they do not prescribe the ethical ideals of behaviour. He suggests that the first commandment “You shall have no other Gods before me” (Exod 20:3) is representative of a minimum legal requirement for belonging to the community of Israel. He notes that while abstaining from worshipping idols and false gods may be considered observing the law, this is only the minimal standard of expectation. “Israel is enjoined to love the Lord with all her heart, soul and strength. To walk after, to cleave to, and to

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love him…Israel’s loyalty to and affection for her God should mirror his love for her.”

As exemplary ideals of the first commandment Wenham points to various narratives throughout the Old Testament such as the intimacy shared between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and of God and Moses of whom God said, “With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speech; and he beholds the form of God” (Num 12:8; Deut 34:10). In these and other stories in Genesis where the heroes, “are repeatedly acting in certain ways the book is implicitly defining certain values and vices, encouraging its reader to imitate the former and avoid the latter.”

Thus where the law falls short in communicating the ideal ethic, Wenham argues, “the stories offer paradigms of behaviour that apply in various situations.” Wenham calls this a paradigmatic approach similar to that of Janzen’s except for the method employed in determining what stories are paradigmatic. The difference Wenham says is that “He (Janzen) seems to rely on instinct to determine what is paradigmatic and what is not…I have used certain criteria of repetition, positive context, and congruity with wisdom ethos to determine whether a trait is to be judged a vice or virtue.”

Similarly, Brevard Childs, who was a professor of Old Testament at Yale University and one of the most influential scholars of the twentieth century, in his commentary on Exodus, uses narrative examples to reinforce and illustrate the seriousness with which Israel held the ten commandments. Commenting specifically on the seventh commandment, Childs writes: “Perhaps the best commentary on the seriousness with which Israel viewed adultery is reflected in the several narratives which relate to the subject.” Childs then goes on to list several

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26 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 81.
27 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 104.
28 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 104.
29 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 104.
narrative examples from Genesis to Malachi to suggest that Israel viewed adultery as being a most offensive crime.

The paradigmatic approach to Old Testament law proposed by Wenham and Janzen and used by Childs is in my view a very fruitful approach to the question of how the law functioned in Israel and how it should continue to function in modern communities of faith. I will nuance this approach in my study of specific Old Testament laws related to the socially marginalized. Unlike Wenham’s approach which draws on the narrative collection of an entire book in order to decipher the combined ethical message of the narratives of that book, and Janzen’s approach which begins with ethical ideals of correct behaviour from which the laws originated, my more focused approach will begin with the laws of the socially marginalized, and use Old Testament narratives as illustrations of the intent of the laws. I then show how the narratives function as a paradigmatic commentary on the laws, and how they then suggest to later readers of the community of faith, ways of appropriating Old Testament laws.

The three narratives that will be held out as examples of Old Testament laws about the socially marginalized will be analysed using a literary-critical approach similar to that utilized by Wenham, who seeks to illuminate “the compositional techniques of the biblical writers…to elucidate the structure of the texts with a view to understanding the writer’s message.”

In doing so, Wenham not only explores a specific narrative but the larger textual context in which that narrative sits, pursuing answers to questions such as: ‘How does one section of a work lead logically into the next?’ and ‘How does each part contribute to the argument of the whole

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31 Wenham, Story as Torah, 17-18.
work?’.  

He also explores the significance of literary devices such as structure, key words, and theme.

This thesis also will follow the literary approach laid out by Tremper Longman who in analysing narratives considers plot, narrator, character, point of view, setting, style, repetitions, omissions, irony, and dialogue. In the narrative examples Wenham and Longman present to illustrate their approach, neither employs every available analytical tool of literary analysis they list, but only the ones they deem necessary to the specific narrative being addressed. Similarly, this thesis will employ the literary devices that are most useful in highlighting the ethical contributions of the chosen narratives.

Historical-critical concerns and debates regarding the nature of the narratives addressed here will not be discussed in this study. For as Wenham suggests: “Since a study of narrative ethics is essentially an attempt to elucidate the writer’s outlook, it usually matters very little whether the story that is told is fiction or history.” Thus this thesis will not be pursing an understanding of the development of the text, but will take a synchronic approach which “takes the text of Scripture at face value and does not try to impose a revisionist concept of tradition development upon it.”

3 The Socially Marginalized in Ancient Israel

The society of ancient Israel was comprised of three loosely defined social units, the tribe, the clan, and the household. The family or bet ‘av, which means ‘house of the father’ was the smallest social entity within Israel. This was a multigenerational household consisting of as

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34 Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 6.
many as four generations. Several families related by blood or marriage, lived together in two to three individual living spaces that were divided by, and connected by, common walls.\footnote{36
Leo G. Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” In Families in Ancient Israel, 163–222, (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 175.} According to Matthews and Benjamin the extended family that was included in this bet ’av unit “was made up of as many sets of childbearing adults and their dependants as was necessary for the entire group to feed and protect itself.”\footnote{37
Victor H. Mathews and Don C. Benjamin, Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 7.} In addition to the family that lived there, there may also have been individuals, along with their families, who were disenfranchised and in need. Purdue’s list of the marginalized that lived with, but were unrelated to the bet ’av unit include, debt servants, slaves, concubines, resident aliens, sojourners, day labourers, orphans, and Levites.\footnote{38
Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 175.} This list should also include widows and in general anyone who was poor and did not already belong to a bet ’av unit. This land owning familial estate survived by cultivating wheat or barley, orchards and vineyards, and also by providing pastures for their herds and flocks to graze.\footnote{39
Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 175.} The bet ’av was the nation of Israel’s “primary social and economic unit.”\footnote{40
Paula McNutt, Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 90.} To be apart from this basic social unit of support, which was the primary source of protection, sustenance, and mutual collaboration and care, was to be at risk of starvation, social isolation, of being taken advantage, or abused.

The bet ’av unit was but one component of the larger social division of the clan, which was comprised of several bet ’av units. Purdue defines the clan, or mishpachah unit as “a residential kinship group of several families.”\footnote{41
Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 177.} Thus the mishpachah consisted of several bet ’av units or
“farm households related by kinship or marriage,”42 and formed the ancient Israelite village. Within these small villages occupying several acres of land lived probably less than one-hundred people.43 According to Gottwald, the small numbers represented only the minimum size of a mishpachah as the term included “a cluster of extended families living in the same or nearby villages, rural neighbourhood, or section of a large settlement.”44 Regardless of the size of the clan, it was the head or father of each bet ‘av unit who functioned as one of the clan elders, which was a group that functioned as the clan’s ruling body. Bendor avers that among the social responsibilities overseen by the clan elders were protecting, cultivating, and developing inherited land; passing on knowledge from one generation to another; arranging marriages; avenging blood; maintaining internal order; allocating resources; and performing the rituals associated with sacrifice, holidays, marriage, birth, death, and burial.45 According to Gottwald, it was also the role of the mishpachah to provide the required number of troops for the tribal army, as well as to work with other neighbouring mishpachahs in providing a local judicial council.46 These neighbouring mishpachahs, in addition to collaborating on matters of protection and justice, were united through “a common language, economic cooperation, shared traditions of law and custom, ancestral stories, and a common religion.”47

Just as the bet ‘av units formed the mishpachah, the mishpachahs formed the Sebet, or tribe. The nation of Israel consisted of twelve tribes each consisting of approximately fifty mishpachahs.48 According to Gottwald, what bound the twelve tribes together were such things as “a common experience of migration, oppression, and military struggle, especially against Canaanite city-

42 Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 177.
43 Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 177.
45 S. Bendor, The Social Structure of Ancient Israel (Jerusalem: Simor, 1996), 118.
46 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 340.
47 Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 177.
48 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 339.
states and the Philistine league.”

Geographically the terrain and climate could change substantially from one tribe to another. As such, each tribe had its own combination of pursuits “in the basic bread-wine-oil agricultural pattern, based on different soils and rainfalls, which produced distinguishable ‘natural regions’.” The functions of the tribe included defense through a tribal levy of troops, a judicial body for cases referred from the local courts, and in times of drought or other difficulties suffered by a clan, assistance.

At each level of the Israel’s social structure, be it the household, clan, or tribe, the people worked together for mutual benefit of protection, subsistence, and justice. Meyers summarizes it this way: “One might view the individual in early Israel as standing inside three concentric circles, representing three levels of social organization. The immediate or smallest circle was fully and directly visible to the individual positioned at the center; the other two impinged less directly and less frequently on one’s consciousness but still were an inextricable part of the individual’s world.” The tribes worked together as one nation, the clans worked together as a tribe, the individual households worked together as a clan, and within the household family and non-family members worked together.

Belonging to a household or a bet 'av unit of an Israelite family, as an actual member of that family or as a foreigner, hired hand, or orphan living under that household, meant one had access to protection, subsistence, and justice. Richter comments: “In a tribal society the family is, literally, the axis of the community. An individual’s link to the legal and economic structures

49 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 339.
50 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 339.
51 Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh, 339.
of society is through the family...those who found themselves without a *bet ‘av*...also found themselves outside the society’s normal means of provision and protection.”

To be cut off from a *bet ‘av*, the most basic social unit of support within Israel, was to be outside the working social support system of the nation. For that marginalized person, it meant social isolation and being vulnerable to abuse. The narratives which will be analyzed in this thesis sharpen the focus on marginalized individuals who for various reasons were cut off from the protection offered by the family, clan and tribe.

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Chapter 2
Jethro and Moses as a Paradigmatic Narrative
of the Laws Concerning Foreigners:
Exodus 2:11-22

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate how the Exod 2:11-22 narrative which tells of Jethro’s meeting and caring for Moses is illustrative of laws that are concerned with Israel’s treatment of foreigners. It will briefly outline Moses’ marginalized legal status as a foreigner, and discuss the laws which prescribe what Israel’s treatment of foreigners ought to be. A narrative analysis follows which highlights Moses’ plight as a foreigner and the various types of care Jethro provides which, as it will be seen, correspond to Israel’s various laws of the foreigner. The conclusion will demonstrate how Jethro’s care for Moses illustrates how Israel’s laws concerning the foreigner might be satisfied, and explores its implications for contemporary Christians.

In Exod 2:11-22 Moses’ status is a person whom the laws of the socially marginalized depict as a ger or foreigner, and as a tosab or sojourner.54 As a distinct category of socially marginalized people, the ger was a resident alien or foreign immigrant. As a non-Hebrew, a ger could never permanently own land in Israel. As Patrick declares: “Without inherited land, a sojourner could not sit among the elders and may not have been allowed to institute suits before the court and thus were vulnerable to exploitation, fraud, and social ostracism.”55 Thus, most non-Hebrews living in Israel served as “hired labourers”56 of the bet ’av unit, and were dependent on their

54 The foreigner laws that apply to this narrative are not to be confused with the category of the nokhri which is also used to describe the “other” and which may also be translated as foreigner. (Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 1998 ed., s.v. “nokhri”).
56 Leo Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” In Families in Ancient Israel (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 198.
daily wage for survival.\textsuperscript{57} Likewise, the tosab, who was just passing through, was also dependent upon the resources and kindnesses of the bet ‘av unit. While the ger was a non-Hebrew, this was not necessarily the case for the tosab who could be a foreigner or a Hebrew who was travelling and needed a place to stay and rest either for one night or an extended period of time.\textsuperscript{58}

While it was possible for the resident alien and the native born or foreign born sojourner to prosper in Israel, this was the exception, not the rule. Whether they were passing through Israel or lived in Israel and were travelling from one tribal land to another, they were at risk of being exploited as was any stranger in a strange land. Without the household protection of the bet ‘av unit, the ger and tosab, (terms which describe Moses’ plight in Exodus 2), would always be vulnerable to others who would take advantage of them or perpetrate some ethnically motivated abuse.

Among the Torah laws that address Israel’s treatment of the socially marginalized are laws that specifically instruct Israel as to how to treat the foreigner. The laws that concern the foreigner contain instructions about how Israel is to protect, provide for, or socially include the foreigner. Such laws were to protect a foreigner from such dangers as starvation, isolation, and of being taken advantage of or even abused by others.

\textsuperscript{58} Leo Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 199.
1 Torah Laws Regarding Israel’s Treatment of the 

Foreigner


Exod 22:21, which instructed Israel to abstain from mistreating or oppressing a foreigner is an example of a law meant to protect the foreigner from abuses that might otherwise be perpetrated by Israelites. Deut 1:16 mandated Israel’s judges to “Hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly, whether the case is between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you.” Adherence to this law ensured that judgements were unbiased and that foreigners would receive the justice due them, whether the judgements were in their favor or against them. Thus the foreigners were protected from what might otherwise be a corrupt judicial system in which Israelite judges could be tempted or bribed into ruling prejudicially in favor of their kinsmen. The concern of these two laws, as well as the laws of Exod 23:9, Lev 19:33, 34; 24:22; 25:35 -37, and Deut 1:16; 24:14-15, 17-18; 27:19, was justice and protection for foreigners living within the borders of Israel.

The Torah also contained laws that stipulated that the Israelites were to provide for the foreigners among them. Lev 19:1-10 for example states: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the
poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.” When this law was followed foreigners, who for the most part did not own their own land, were provided the opportunity to gather food for themselves from the fields of Israelites. Provision of food for foreigners by the Israelites is also prescribed in Deut 26:12-13. This law directs the Israelites to set aside a tenth of all their produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, and give it to “the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied” (Deut 26:12). They are then to declare to God, “I have removed from my house the sacred portion and have given it to the Levite, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, according to all you commanded. I have not turned aside from your commands nor have I forgotten any of them” (Deut 26:13). In this way the foreigners in Israel who did not have their own cultivatable land were provided food. The concern of these two laws, in addition to the laws of Lev 23:22; 25:6, and Deut 10:18-19; 14:21, 28-29; 24:19-22, is that the foreigners living among the Israelites are provided food and in some cases even clothing.

The laws regarding foreigners also stipulated that Israel was to include foreigners. Lev 19:33-34, an example of a law that directed Israel as to how to treat foreigners among them states: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” This law provided a more specific example of the out workings of the more general command: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Specifying that the foreigner was to receive love equal to that which Israelites would show to themselves was an expression of comprehensive community inclusion. Not only were the Israelites to abstain from mistreating outsiders, but they were to actually extend the same social invitations, care, and compassion to foreigners that they would offer to their kinsmen. This law of showing love toward one’s foreign neighbour is set within a list of laws that is introduced by
the statement “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). This framework suggests that as people loved their foreign neighbours as themselves they were modeling the god-like and holy behaviour that God intended his people to exhibit.

Even in the area of cultic practices foreigners were to be included as indicated by Num 15:26-31. A similar law of inclusion that declared that all the sins committed unintentionally, by either an Israeliite or a foreigner, required the sacrifice of a year old female goat. The offering of the goat was made by the priest and the same forgiveness that was imparted to the Israelites was imparted to the foreigner. Here the non-Israelites were included in the religious community. The concern of these two laws, as well as the laws in Exod 23:12, Num 15:14-16; 35:15, Lev 17:8-9, 10-14, 15-16; 18:26; 20:2; 22:18-19; 24:16, Deut 5:13-14; 16:9-15; 29:10-12; and 31:12, is that the foreigner not suffer isolation in the form of communal and social exclusion due to ethnic difference, and that they be included and incorporated into Israelite society.

2 Negative and Positive Examples of Israel’s Treatment of the Ger

Embedded within Old Testament law was the protection, provision, and inclusion of the ger.

The existence of such laws and the stories of mistreatment of foreigners in Israel’s history attest to the necessity of such laws as Israel did not always comply with their legal obligations to foreigners. One such example of mistreatment is Sarah’s abuse of her Egyptian servant Hagar who chose to run away from Abraham’s bet ‘av, preferring to risk her life alone in the wilderness (Gen 16:6-7, see also Gen 21:8-21). Later, Israel’s first king Saul ignored a treaty that Israel had established with the Gibeonites, and sought to destroy them. “Now the Gibeonites were not a part of Israel but were survivors of the Amorites; the Israelites had sworn to spare
them, but Saul in his zeal for Israel and Judah had tried to annihilate them” (2 Sam 21:2). Saul, did not simply go to war to win land, but also perpetrated an act of genocide against “foreigners” within Israel.

Even King David may have acted in a discriminatory manner toward foreigners when he took advantage of Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. When David saw Bathsheba for the first time and desired her, he did not take her for himself right away. “David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her” (2 Sam 11:3-4). It was only after David discovered that Bathsheba was the wife of a foreigner, the Hittite Uriah, that he decided to sleep with her.

The prophet Ezra, in his efforts to rebuild a nation which was religiously and ethnically pure, did so at the expense of non-Israelite women and their half-Israelite children by extracting them from the *bet 'av* and consequently sentencing them to a life of isolation and vulnerability.

Moreover, because Israel’s culture was patrilineal and patrilocal,59 the poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion of the family members who were “sent away” (Ezra 10:3) would be generational. Neither the children nor the children’s children would ever be able to own land in Israel. In accordance with Ezra’s reforms, they would be outside the *bet 'av*, and therefore outside the care of the clan, the tribe, and the nation. Ezra’s new legislation had the potential of creating generations of disenfranchised people living in Israel as he worked contrary to the Torah laws which sought to undo the vulnerability and social isolation of Israel’s population of foreigners.

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59 The terms ‘patrilineal’ and ‘patrilocal’ refer respectively to the passing on of the family’s inheritance and authority from father to son and that the woman left her family to join the family of her husband respectively. (Leo Purdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 1997), 180.
Not every Old Testament narrative illustration of the laws regarding foreigners is negative. When Israel first approached the Promised Land, Joshua sent spies into Jericho. When the King of Jericho learned that the spies had been at the house of Rahab the prostitute he went after them. Rahab however saved their lives by hiding them and in turn the spies promised to spare Rahab and her family when the invasion took place. Upon attack, “Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day” (Josh 6:25). Joshua could have ignored the promise the spies had made, but instead permitted this non-Hebrew family to live in the land which would become Israel’s.

Likewise, King David honoured a promise that Israel made to foreigners. In an attempt to atone for the sins of King Saul against the Gibeonites, King David handed over descendants of Saul to be put to death (2 Sam 21:1-14). This act of atonement that David made on behalf of Israel also demonstrated Israel’s acceptance of the Gibeonites inclusion within the borders of Israel.

Another example that illustrates the laws regarding the treatment of foreigners being observed is found in the story of the exodus. It contains a specific reference to the ger in the naming of Moses’ son (Exod 2:11-22) that provides an intertextual link to the laws about the ger.

3 The Paradigmatic Narrative of Jethro and Moses: Literary Analysis

3.1 Theme

Exod 2:11-22 provides yet another example of the treatment of a foreigner though ironically, it features a vulnerable Israelite cared for by a Midianite family. This short narrative, in which
Jethro saves Moses from being exploited as a foreigner in Midian, is part of the larger story of Israel’s escape from Egypt, a story which is laced together by the theme of salvation. Exodus begins with the Egyptian oppression of Israel, God’s desire to rescue his people and take them to a new land, and ends with God’s presence dwelling in the midst of the Israelite camp with Israel on their way to the Promised Land. The story of Moses also carries this salvation theme. He is a born as a foreigner and slave and despite Pharaoh’s order of death, is rescued by midwives, his mother, his sister, and Pharaoh’s daughter, and becomes part of the Egyptian hierarchy. An identity crisis leads him to kill an Egyptian, which again puts him under an order of death by Pharaoh. Moses flees, living a life of exile in Midian, where he once more becomes a foreigner. In Midian Moses again experiences salvation, this time at the hand of the Midianite priest Jethro who takes Moses into his home and family.

From a foreigner slave saved into royalty, to identification as a Hebrew, to subsequent exclusion as a foreign exile in Midian, Moses experienced extreme transitions. He knew what it was like to live with wealth and power as an integral part of society, as well as what it was like to live as a vulnerable foreigner, marginalized from society, and then what it was like to be rescued from that. As such, Moses was the ideal person to lead his people out of Egypt to freedom, and to be Israel’s law giver; a law which strongly advocates Israel’s responsibility to extend great care to the foreigner.

3.2 Textual Boundaries

The story’s beginning, “One day, after Moses had grown up” (Exod 2:11), marks a temporal transition in the narrative not only by the introduction of a new day but also by indicating that Moses is now an adult and that some time has passed. The story ends with Moses’ naming his
son (2:22) as verse 23 clearly shifts the focus to the plight of Israel in bondage in Egypt. This narrative section of verses 11-22 is also marked by the theme of injustice, or more specifically, Moses’ response to injustice. Within just eleven verses Moses is faced with, and responds to, three acts of injustice.\(^{61}\)

### 3.3 Narrator

This short narrative is told from the same narrative perspective as the larger narrative in which it is set. What occurs before, during, and after Exod 2:11-22 is told from the narrator’s third person perspective displaying not only omniscience but also omnipresence.\(^{62}\) The narrator demonstrates awareness of the actions, thoughts and feelings of all the characters, including God’s, with statements such as: “she felt sorry for him” (2:6), “God remembered His covenant” (2:24), and “he was afraid to look at God” (3:6). Narrative omnipresence is demonstrated by the story’s moving from one setting to another, and from a general view to a selective one.

Given the narrator’s penchant for details the episode in Exod 2:11-22 is remarkably succinct. The narrator does not provide, for example, such details as, the time it took for Moses to get from Egypt to Midian, the actions, thoughts, and feelings of Moses while on that journey, the location of the well in Midian, or the means by which Moses thwarts the mistreatment of women by several shepherds. Obviously there is a purpose behind the narrator’s selection of what information to relay to the reader and what to omit.

What the narrator does include in verses 11-17, is a list of three successive acts of injustice and Moses’ subsequent intrusions. In the first scene Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. In

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response, Moses intervenes and kills the Egyptian (vv. 11-12). In the next scene, which is the very next day, Moses sees one Hebrew wrongly beating another Hebrew and again intervenes by confronting the one in the wrong (vv. 13-14). Pharaoh in turn tries to kill Moses who flees and ends up by a well in Midian. There he sees seven sisters being mistreated by several shepherds and again Moses intervenes: “Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock” (vv. 15-17). By listing in quick succession three injustices and Moses’ response to them, the narrator links Moses with the theme of injustice.

As the scene then turns to Jethro’s home in the second half of this narrative in verses 18-22, the narrator’s focus is directed towards the actions of Jethro who in contrast to those who act unjustly provides food for Moses, invites Moses to live with him, and then invites Moses into his family. The narrator first points out that Jethro’s daughters are negligent in offering hospitality to the ger, a hospitality that is not only an expectation of Old Testament law but when tendered “demonstrates righteousness.” In contrast to his daughters’ inhospitable attitude towards the ger, the narrator presents Jethro’s behaviour towards the ger as being generously hospitable.

In the last verse of the story the narrator adds the ensuing outcomes of Jethro’s meal invitation. Jethro gives his daughter Zipporah to Moses as a wife, Zipporah and Moses then have a son, and Moses names his son Gershom saying, “I have been a foreigner in a foreign land” (v. 22). The narrator chooses here to include the reason Moses names his son Gershom, which means

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64 The NIV’s present tense rendering of Moses’ statement “גֵּר הָיִִ֔יתִי בְּאֶֶ֖רֶץ נָכְּרִיָָּֽה” makes the foreign land he is referring to Midian saying “I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.” Others (Childs 27, Durham 24, Sarna 12), prefer the past tense rendering pointing to Egypt as the foreign land Moses is referring to. The context also prefers the past tense rendering, not only pointing to Egypt as the land Moses is referring to but also to Midian prior to becoming Jethro’s son-in-law.
“stranger there.” Brevard Childs suggests that this information is included to make the reader aware that Moses remembers that he “belongs to another people, in another land.” Certainly Moses has not forgotten his roots. However, the narrator’s purpose for including this information goes even further. Even though Moses was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in the household of Pharaoh, Moses was a Hebrew and Pharaoh’s home could never really be his home. Likewise, even among his fellow Hebrews Moses could not be at home because he was a part of the family which oppressed the Hebrews as slaves. Furthermore, Moses was a foreigner in a foreign land in Midian before Jethro’s home became his home. Like his son, Moses was a stranger.

Verse 22 however marks a change in Moses’ status. By including Moses’ statement, “I have been a foreigner in a foreign land” (v. 22) the narrator indicates that Moses’ status of not belonging or not being at home in Egypt and in Midian is in the past for finally he has been fully included in a family and has a home. Thus Durham states: “Here he had been received into the innermost circle of a people who had never seen him before. Moses, who had been all his life a stranger there, was here a stranger no longer.” Moses, who had never really had a home in Egypt, who being exiled became a homeless foreigner in Midian, now had a home, thanks to Jethro’s willingness to extend hospitality to a foreigner.

3.4 Characters: Jethro and Moses

The first main actor the reader encounters in the Exod 2:11-22 story is Moses. Prior to this point in the larger Exodus narrative the reader has very little knowledge of Moses who could be

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classified as a ‘type’ persona in the story as he has “limited or stereotyped range of traits.” But as this story begins the narrator is quick to develop the persona of Moses, he becomes a character “who has a broader range of traits and whose development we can observe.” Through the three injustices that occur and Moses’ quick reaction to alleviate the injustices the reader learns what kind of a man Moses has become despite having been raised in Pharaoh’s household. As Amit observes: “No matter the victim or the oppressor or the type of injustice, it must be taken up and strong effort made to bring it to an end…Moses’ sense of justice transcends boundaries of nationality, gender, and kinship…(he risks) his own life, a characteristic needed for action on behalf of those suffering injustice.” The narrator occupies the first half of this eleven-verse narrative with the theme of injustice in order to draw the reader’s attention, not only to Moses’ intolerance for injustice, but also to Moses’ compassion which drives him to come to the aid of those who suffer needlessly. Once the injustice scenes end and Moses’ upright quality is established his character development wanes. It is at this point that the reader is introduced to Jethro.

The first thing the reader learns about Jethro is that he is a priest of Midian who has seven daughters and raises flocks (v. 16). Even though the narrator does not comment on whether Jethro has sons or not, the reader is to infer that he does not since it is his seven daughters who pasture the flock. The reader may also make a further inference about Jethro’s status. As a man who is a priest and has flocks he is not a poor man, but the fact that his daughters are the ones taking care of the flocks and not servants indicates that he is not a wealthy man.

The second piece of information the narrator shares about Jethro is that he is also known by the name Reuel which means “Friend of God.” Since names can be used to reveal character, personality and even destiny in the Old Testament, the reader can expect that Jethro’s actions as relayed by the narrator will be above reproach.

Third, Jethro’s actions reveal his character. When the daughters tell their father that they have been rescued from the shepherds it is significant that they identify their rescuer as “An Egyptian” (v. 19), rather than simply as ‘a stranger’ or ‘a man’. The fact that Moses is identified as Egyptian, presumably by his clothing, suggests to Jethro that this rescuer is a foreigner and therefore someone who is vulnerable. Jethro immediately reacts to this news by reproving his daughters for not inviting the foreigner to his home and directs them to “invite him to have something to eat” (v. 20). We are not told what Jethro is thinking at this point. If Jethro had wanted to take advantage of the situation, he might have enslaved Moses as he has no sons to do the work normally done by men. Perhaps Jethro only wanted to thank the foreigner for helping his daughters. Moses cannot know for sure. However, the reader quickly discovers that Jethro’s intentions are honourable; he extends the invitation because his “deep-seated sense of responsibility for hospitality has been aroused.”

Presumably the meal was shared and the reader can infer by the notice of Moses’ agreeing “to stay with the man” (v. 21) that Jethro also offered Moses a place to live perhaps as a working family member. The narrator is concerned here to highlight the primacy Jethro places on

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75 Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 32.
extending hospitality to strangers, even strangers who are foreigners. Going beyond the norms of ancient Near Eastern hospitality however, Jethro also gives his daughter to Moses as a wife.

4 The Jethro and Moses Narrative as a Paradigmatic Commentary on the Laws Concerning Foreigners

Exod 2:11-22 with its focus on providing hospitality for the foreigner functions as a paradigmatic commentary on the Torah laws that address Israel’s treatment of foreigners. The narrative’s two main characters, Jethro and Moses, are directly involved in illustrating those laws. Jethro, on the one hand, a priest of some status, was not particularly wealthy, as his daughters did the work servants might have done. Moses, on the other hand, is clearly marginalized as he is a criminal running for his life, a Hebrew/Egyptian exile, and homeless in Midian. As a socially marginalized person, Moses belongs to the category of ger, the person specifically named in the Torah laws as a foreigner. He is at risk of being captured and made a slave, of being beaten and robbed of what little he may have with him, of starvation, and isolation.

The status of both Jethro and Moses is established by the narrator before they meet. When Jethro first hears of Moses’ plight he scolds his daughters for not inviting him to come to a meal and commands them to do so. When Moses arrives, Jethro could have mistreated him or simply regarded him with the disrespect commonly afforded to foreigners, but he does not. Instead Jethro treats Moses extremely well; he shares a meal with Moses, invites him to stay as a member of his household, and then, by giving Moses his daughter as a wife, Jethro welcomes Moses as a son.

All four of Jethro’s actions illustrate the fulfillment of the legal concerns of the Torah laws that address Israel’s treatment of foreigners. Even though Jethro was a Midianite and not an Israelite, his actions towards the ger nevertheless illustrate the behaviours intended by the Old Testament laws relating to the foreigner. This is not accomplished through obedience to every letter of the law. Rather, Jethro’s behaviour illustrates how the concern of each law is satisfied; that is to say, Israel is to protect, provide for, or socially included the foreigner.

### 4.1 Jethro Abstains from Mistreating Moses

The first action of Jethro toward Moses serves to illustrate the legal concerns of Exod 22:21; 23:9, and Lev 19:33. By withholding from Moses the mistreatment, exploitation, and abuse that foreigners often met, Jethro illustrates the concern of Old Testament laws which stipulate that the foreigner is not to be oppressed or mistreated, but rather protected. Jethro is thus illustrative of a model Torah-keeper.

### 4.2 Jethro Provides Food for Moses

The second action that Jethro takes towards Moses is providing food for him. The hospitality offered to a stranger not only demonstrates righteousness,\(^78\) but it also satisfies the intent of several laws. Deut 10:18-19, for example, exhorts that the foreigner be provided with food and clothing which this law defines as an expression of love. While Jethro’s provision of food here does not satisfy the clothing requirement, his next action does.

### 4.3 Jethro Invites Moses to Live with Him

The third act of benevolence which Jethro extends to Moses is the invitation to stay and live with him (Exod 2:21). By incorporating Moses into his household Jethro assumes responsibility

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for him. Jethro is now able to ensure that Moses the foreigner is looked upon and treated as a foreigner under his guardianship and bet 'av. This would ensure that community members treat Moses more justly than they might.

Within the household of Jethro, Moses is afforded protection. The laws of Num 35:15, Deut 1:16; 24:17-18, and 27:19, served to protect the foreigner from injustice, the former offering protection from wrong retaliation, and the latter protection from victimization at the hands of an unjust court biased against foreigners. Alone, Moses would have no one to advocate on his behalf. But as a member of Jethro’s household Jethro becomes Moses’ advocate, thereby ensuring him protection from injustice. Protection is also the concern of Lev 25:35-37 which explains that foreigners are not to be financially taken advantage of by stating that when they require financial assistance, the money is to be lent, incurring neither cost to the borrower nor profit to the lender. Similarly, Deut 24:14-15 states that a foreigner who has been hired is to be paid before the sunset of each day. In so doing, the law ensures the worker is paid in a timely fashion so as not to endure hardship. While both of these financial laws are concerned with protecting the foreigner from being the victim of financial abuse, the justice laws are concerned with protecting the foreigner from injustice. The intent of these laws is satisfied through Moses’ incorporation into Jethro’s household.

Within the household of Jethro, Moses is also afforded a civil inclusion. Civil inclusion comes with the further equal treatment mandated by the law of Exod 23:12 which stipulates one day of rest for all. This version of the law does not specifically include a theological motivation like its counterpart in Deut 5:13-14; it is a more civically concerned law. Lev 24:22 is also concerned with civic fairness in its decree that laws apply to foreigners and natives alike. Both of these
laws are concerned with equal treatment in civic society, which is what Jethro affords Moses by including him into his household.

4.4 Jethro Invites Moses Into His Family

As his final kindness Jethro extends to Moses an invitation to join his family as a son by offering his daughter to him as a wife. While there are no laws in the Torah which instruct the household head to give a daughter to a foreigner in marriage, or to adopt a foreigner into the family, Israel’s law did forbid intermarriage with foreigners: “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you” (Deut 7:3-5). Jethro however was not a follower of the God of Israel at this point and so fulfilment of this law is not expected. His actions of elevating Moses’ status to that of a full family member however can be interpreted as fulfilling Lev 19:34 which states: “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself.”

This Exodus story with its emphasis on Jethro's seven daughters and no mention of a son suggests that Moses, in marrying Jethro’s daughter, becomes Jethro’s only son and sole male successor. As such Moses would be afforded a “privileged status” even though he had been married, or adopted, into the family. Thus, Jethro’s invitation to Moses to become a full member of the family with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto, not only satisfies the law of love for the foreigner but exceeds it.

5 Conclusion

Jethro meets Moses with four actions. First Jethro protects Moses by not taking advantage of his vulnerability. Second, Jethro provides food for Moses through a meal invitation. Third, Jethro shelters Moses inviting him to be a part of the protective social group of a household. Fourth, Jethro incorporates Moses into his family as a son, through marriage to his daughter. Each of Jethro’s actions can be viewed as an increasing expression of love.

By conferring such practical care on Moses, Jethro satisfies the concerns of the Torah laws that address Israel’s treatment of foreigners. Specifically, he does not suffer because of his foreignness, he is not abused, he does not starve, and he does not live isolated from community. Thus, as Jethro’s actions serve to protect, provide for, and include Moses, they not only accomplish the interest of many Old Testament laws, but exceed them.

Although it seems ironic that Jethro, a non-Israelite, can be seen as modelling the intent of Israel's laws regarding the foreigner, his behaviours of protection, provision, and inclusion towards Moses more than satisfy the concerns of the Torah laws. Other Old Testament narratives also feature outsiders, including women and children, who show insiders how to live. The Pharoah, for example, reprimands Abraham for lying about his relationship with Sarah (Gen 12:10-20). In Gen 38 Tamar is judged as being more righteous than Judah who neglected the duties of his bet 'av by not allowing her to marry his youngest son (Gen 38:26).

For subsequent readers of Scripture, Exod 2:11-22 functions as a commentary on Old Testament laws regarding how to treat foreigners. Since foreigners include all those who lack a local system of support, such as family, for their protection, provision, and inclusion, opportunities for applying the lessons of these laws are many. Canada prides itself on being a multicultural society. In 2010 alone, “Canada welcomed the highest number of legal immigrants in more than
50 years.\textsuperscript{81} New immigrants, however, face many challenges including barriers of language, culture, and laws. With the continuing influx of foreigners into Canada comes the opportunity for extending the kind of care for foreigners mandated in Old Testament laws. Like Jethro who modelled how foreigners ought to be treated according to the law of God, Christians can extend to newcomers protection, provision, and social inclusion. Protection, for example, can be offered by showing immigrants how to deal with those who would take advantage of them through phone scams, credit card fraud, or identity theft. There are also opportunities to provide food or employment. Even if a foreigner does not require financial assistance, he or she may be vulnerable to social isolation. As Christians befriend newcomers, there will be the opportunity to help them get connected with other Canadians of a similar ethnic or national background, places of worship, or social groups that match their interests.

Such care is provided in Peterborough Ontario through the non-profit charitable organization The New Canadians Centre Peterborough which is dedicated to supporting immigrants, refugees and other newcomers.\textsuperscript{82} In Toronto, Romero House is dedicated primarily to supporting refugees acting “as a bridge between the shelter and more long-term housing, supporting (refugees) in a difficult time in their lives.”\textsuperscript{83} Just as the Jethro and Moses story is an example of treating a foreigner with love and thus satisfying the intent of God’s laws, so too Christians, under the authority of the Torah, have the opportunity and obligation to go and do likewise.


Chapter 3
The Story of Boaz and Ruth as a Paradigm of the Laws Concerning Widows:
Ruth 1-4

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate how the story of Boaz’s care for the widow Ruth in the book of Ruth is illustrative of laws that are concerned with Israel’s treatment of widows. It will briefly outline Ruth’s marginalized legal status as a widow, and discuss the laws which direct Israel in their treatment of widows. The narrative will then be analyzed highlighting Ruth’s predicament as a widow and Boaz’s response of care, which illustrate the various Old Testament laws of the widow. The conclusion will show that Boaz’s care for Ruth illustrates how the intentions of the laws concerning the widow might be satisfied, and suggest contemporary implications for the church.

In the story of Ruth there are three marginalized widows, Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi. Their stories highlight how dependent individuals were on the family support system of the bet ‘av. Within each household, the responsibilities for various tasks were divided between male and female family members. Meyers stresses that, “in a household responsible for producing and processing nearly everything it needed for survival, the range of tasks was maximal and could not have been accomplished without the active involvement of all household members.”84 While males and females were dependent upon each other for their survival, the females were dependent on the males for the land that made that survival possible. According to Meyers, the culture operated under a system of “patrilineal descent (a system that traces decent and group membership through males) and patrilocal residence (a norm that requires newly wed couples to

84 Meyers, Discovering Eve, 145.
live with or near the husband’s parents),”85 in which ancestral lands passed through the male lineage.86

In early Israelite society women needed “the protection and economic support of an adult male.”87 If, due to war or disease or some other mortal fate, a wife lost her husband who was providing that support, she could turn to the deceased’s family or to her family for that protection and economic support. A widow was destitute if she had no sons or household to provide for her support.88 The deaths of their husbands, placed Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi in a precarious situation. Unable to survive on their own they took action in an effort to find security. Having limited options, Orpah returned to her mother’s household in her Moabite homeland (Ruth 1:8, 14) and Naomi returned to her Israelite community. Ruth however, rather than return to her mother’s household (1:8), committed herself to Naomi, choosing to pursue and accept whatever security Naomi could find, following her to Israel (1:16-17).

Ruth’s choice to pursue a life in Israel is surprising given the intolerance Israelites showed to Moabites. Not only were Moabites prohibited from entering the assembly of the Lord, but the Israelites were forbidden from seeking a friendship with them (Deut 23:3-6). Despite the potentially discriminatory challenges Ruth would likely face as a Moabite foreigner in Israel, she decided to follow Naomi to Bethlehem. While Naomi and Orpah were marginalized by their widowed status, in Israel Ruth’s marginalized status and striving would be compounded by nationality. For Naomi who was much older, returning to the household of her mother was probably not an option as both parents by this time would be dead. Naomi’s only option for survival was to return to the community of her dead husband’s kinsmen to live a life of

85 Meyers, “The Family in Early Israel,” 34.
86 Meyers, Discovering Eve, 38.
dependence, relying on the Bethlehemite community and Israel’s laws regarding the treatment of widows for her survival.

Within Israel, there were laws that instructed the community specifically regarding their treatment of widows, laws which the rebukes of the prophets suggest were necessary.\(^8\) The prophet Isaiah, for example, condemned Jerusalem’s leaders for refusing to hear the widow’s pleas for justice (Isa 1:23). So too, the prophet Jeremiah, stood at the temple gate and pleaded with the people of Judah to change their ways by ceasing their oppression of widows (Jer 7:6), so that they would be permitted to remain in the land. The people of Judah however, refused to change their ways and were displaced from their land. While the people were in exile the prophet Zechariah reminded them that they were there at least in part because they refused to heed the warning of the former prophets to cease their oppression of widows (Zech 7:10). Disregard for biblical laws meant that widows were at risk of social exclusion, starvation, being taken advantage of or abused.\(^9\)

1 Torah Laws Regarding Israel’s Treatment of the Widow

The following laws in the Torah address Israel’s treatment of the widow: Exod 22:22-23, Deut 10:18-19, 14:28-29, 16:9-17, 24:17-18; 19-22, 25:5-6, 26:12-13, and 27:19. Each of these laws is concerned primarily with the widow’s protection, provision, or inclusion by Israel.

One of the laws concerned with the protection of the widow states: “Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry”

(Exod 22:22-23). Without the protection of a husband or family household, the widow was at risk of being taken advantage of by those who prey on the weak. There is no explanation of what constitutes taking advantage except that which is implied in verse 23 which suggests that it embraces any action or inaction against a widow that causes her to cry out, or appeal, directly to God for help. This cry is the same “cry of distress” that Israel called out to God with when enslaved in Egypt. This law therefore instructs Israel to abstain from treating a widow in any way that might cause her to cry out to God, thereby protecting her of being taken advantage of.

The other laws concerned with the protection of the widow are Deut 24:17-18 and 27:19.

An example of a law concerned with provisions made for the widow is Deut 10:18, which mandates Israel to defend the cause of the widow, and to give her food and clothing. While having sufficient food and clothing protects the widow from starvation and the elements, the main concern of this law is that Israel provides the widow with the basic necessities to sustain life. The intent of Deut 24:19-22, the law of gleaning, is that widows are provided food by the local population. This law permits widows to glean from the fields of another the produce which remains after the harvest. The widows Ruth and Naomi depend heavily on this law, as land that belonged to Naomi’s husband Elimilech, as Matthews points out, had likely been unattended for the ten years they were in Moab, or as Sakenfeld notes, someone else was now farming it. Hubbard acknowledges however, that despite the law, “unfortunately, greedy owners and reapers probably often obstructed the efforts of gleaners by ridicule, tricks, and in some cases outright expulsion.” Deut 14:28-29 and 26:12-13 also mandate that Israel provide for widows.

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92 Francis Brown et al., Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 858.
94 Sakenfeld, Ruth, 71.
Old Testament laws also address the issue of the widow’s inclusion. Deut 16:9-15, for example, stipulates that widows be included in the celebrations of the festival of Feast of Weeks, also called the Feast of the Harvest, which was to be a time of rejoicing (v. 11) and of feasting, a time when the community would gather to celebrate God’s bounty and come to know “love and reverence for God.” This law specifically names widows, among others, as those the Israelites were to ensure were not excluded. While this law did ensure that the widow shared in the food of the festival, its primary concern was that the widow was included in this communal celebration in honour of God.

The primary concern of the levirate marriage law in Deut 25:5-10 is also inclusion. It directed that when two brothers live together and one of the brothers die, the surviving brother is to marry his deceased brother’s widow. This law has been the source of much debate with regards to the role it plays in the book of Ruth. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky list the reasons most scholars have interpreted the marriage of Boaz and Ruth as a levirate union: “(1) Ruth 4:5, 10 show that Boaz’s marriage to Ruth was a levirate type of marriage, similar at least to that prescribed in Deut 25:5-10… (2) In 3:9 Ruth bases her request that Boaz accept the levirate marriage responsibilities on the fact that he is a …‘redeemer’. (3)….Boaz uses the implications of the redeemer’s double responsibilities of ‘levirate’ marriage to Ruth…to induce the unnamed goel,…to cede those rights and responsibilities to him.” Against the view that Boaz’s marriage to Ruth was a levirate union, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky set out the following arguments:

98 Tigay, *Deuteronomy,* 122.
The key word for levir or levirate marriage is missing from the negotiations concerning the marriage of Boaz to Ruth; Nothing indicates that Boaz is the brother of Mahlon or that there is an expectation that a distant kin act as a levir; Ruth’s one ambiguous request to Boaz on the threshing floor is redemption, not marriage. Any reference to matrimony is at best allusive; The son of Boaz and Ruth is reckoned in the book’s genealogy as Boaz’s son, not as the son of Elimelech…or Mahlon…In other words, he is not regarded as the child of a levirate marriage and does not perpetuate the name of the deceased; Neither the narrator, Naomi, or Boaz refers to Boaz as a levir.  

While Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky conclude that a levirate marriage is not at work in the Ruth story, the law of Deut 25:5-10 seems to be present to some degree. Bush offers the following mediating position: “Even though the obligation presumed had no legal standing and accorded no legal rights to the parties involved and its refusal carried no appreciable social stigma, Ruth 4:5d clearly implies that a communally recognized moral obligation, a family responsibility, on the part of the next of kin did exist.”  

This expresses well the thrust of this thesis which acknowledges the authority of the letter of the levirate law, but prioritizes the intent of the law which is to influence behaviour toward a care for the marginalized, or in this case the widow. Richter uses the word redemption to describe this type of behaviour saying, “Redemption was the means by which a lost family member was restored to a place of security within the kinship circle. This was a patriarch’s responsibility; this was the safety net for Israel’s society.”  

While the letter of the law in Deut 25:5-10 does not mention the care of the widow, Campbell acknowledges that this law “is not simply concerned with producing a male child, nor even with producing an heir to the dead man’s property; it is concerned every bit as much with the care of the widow.”  

The book of Ruth begins with the plight of three widows: Orpah returns to her Moabite home to find her security, Naomi returns to her home in Bethlehem for community support, and Ruth

100 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, xxxvi.
follows Naomi. In the harvest fields of Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth not only find the community support they were hoping for, but with the help of Naomi, Ruth marries the land owner Boaz, and both Naomi and Ruth move inside the familial social support structure of a bet 'av unit of protection, provision, and inclusion. A literary analysis, focusing on the aspects of genre, dialogue, theme, and plot follows, with a view to reading the story as an illustration of what the laws of widows look like when their intentions are satisfied.

2 The Paradigmatic Narrative of Boaz and Ruth: Literary Analysis

2.1 Genre

The question of literary genre is not straightforward as the story of Boaz and Ruth does not fall easily into any one literary genre. Most scholars suggest that the book is either a novella or short story, or something between a novella and short story.

Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, for example, argue for a mediating position between a novella and a short story. In a novella the narrative is primarily or wholly fictional and, while it entertains, its primary purpose is to edify rather than inform. Further, it is concerned more with dialogue and describing situations and characters than for reporting facts. The short story on the other hand is “briefer than the novella and will have fewer characters, a less complex plot structure, and a more limited time frame,” and “intends to reveal its characters, not develop them.” Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky point out that while Ruth’s character is “revealed

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104 Hubbard, *Ruth*, 47.
through her words and actions”\textsuperscript{107} the characters of Naomi and Boaz “develop as a result of their encounters with Ruth.”\textsuperscript{108} Thus for Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky the genre of Ruth lies between a novella and a short story.

Contrariwise, Younger, with Bush, argues that Ruth is an “edifying short story.”\textsuperscript{109} Younger qualifies his choice of genre by saying that the Ruth narrative, “gets at the didactic and instructional aspects of the book.”\textsuperscript{110} Bush is more specific pointing out the narrator’s “varied and unremittingly positive characterization of Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi…as exemplary characters is quite contrast to the vast bulk of the rest of Old Testament narrative.”\textsuperscript{111} Bush concludes that this immaculate characterization exists to accomplish the narrator’s purpose of presenting “models for his readers to emulate.”\textsuperscript{112} Bush’s argument is convincing and thus an edifying short story is the preferred genre for the Ruth narrative, as the farmer Boaz is portrayed through his actions and dialogue to be an exemplary character who comes to the aid of widows in need, showing the reader how to live according to the law with respect to widows.

2.2 Dialogue

With further regards to the subject of dialogue, Ruth may also be classified as typical of a dialogic rather than monologic narrative. Unlike a monologic narrative such as Chronicles, a dialogic narrative, as Fewell and Gunn suggest, “is more open to multiple interpretations, entertains within it several ideological points of view or ‘voices’, often in tension, and is characterized by restraint on the part of the narrator and a premium on ‘showing’ through

\textsuperscript{107} Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Ruth}, xix.
\textsuperscript{108} Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Ruth}, xix.
\textsuperscript{109} Lawson Younger Jr., \textit{Judges/Ruth}, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 397.
\textsuperscript{110} Younger, \textit{Judges/Ruth}, 397.
\textsuperscript{111} Bush, \textit{Ruth, Esther}, 46.
\textsuperscript{112} Bush, \textit{Ruth, Esther}, 46.
characters’ actions and dialogue rather than simply ‘telling.’”[113] The technique of showing through characters’ actions and dialogue rather than simply telling is used extensively in Ruth. Through the speeches of Naomi, Orpah, Ruth and Boaz are said to have shown chesed, or kindness. Through the actions of the characters Ruth and Boaz this claim is confirmed. The narrator thus uses the literary device of the dialogic narrative and the actions of the characters Boaz and Ruth to highlight chesed, which not only arises as a controlling theme in the story, but is also shown to be the edifying characteristic of Boaz as he comes to the rescue of widows in need.

2.3 Theme

Most scholars agree that chesed, which is usually translated as kindness or loyalty, is either the theme or an important theme in the book of Ruth. But as Campbell suggests, chesed is “more than the loyalty which one expects if he stands in covenant with another person - it is that extra which both establishes and sustains covenant. It is more than ordinary human loyalty; it imitates the divine initiative which comes without being deserved.”[114] Sakenfeld suggests further that chesed refers to “care or concern for another with whom one is in relationship, but care that specifically takes shape in action to rescue the other from a situation of desperate need, and under circumstances in which the rescuer is uniquely qualified to do what is needed.”[115] Nielsen adds that chesed can also “require a person to choose the unexpected and not just be satisfied with what the law declares.”[116] Summarily then, within the context of Ruth, chesed is a godly characteristic that is expressed through one’s extravagant actions of kindness, which are extended sacrificially if need be, in order to secure the wellbeing of a communal other. These

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113 Fewell and Gunn, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible, 7.
114 Campbell, Ruth, 81.
115 Katharine Sakenfeld, Ruth, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 11.
fuller definitions of *chesed* aptly describe Boaz’s treatment of the widowed foreigner Ruth. Through his excessive generosity towards Ruth and subsequently Naomi, Boaz is set out as a model character who illustrates the intent of the laws of the widow. So that the point is not missed by the reader, the narrator further emphasises Boaz as a model of behaviour, by overtly naming Boaz as *chesed*, (2:20).

2.4 Plot

The story begins with a description of the dire personal circumstances of Naomi who has been bereaved of her native home, her husband, and her sons. It then introduces two other widows, Naomi’s widowed Moabite daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. Without the presence of a father, husband, or son, without land and the protection and provision of the *bet ‘av* unit, these women had very limited options. Perdue lists the three options open to these widows: a widow could remain a member of her husband’s family if a kinsman took her as a wife, or she could live in the household of her husband’s kinsman, or she could return to the household of her parents.\(^{117}\) Having heard that the famine in Judah had ended, Naomi takes the only option available to her and sets out for her home of Bethlehem, where the kinsmen of her husband resided. She recommends to the other widows that they each return to the home of their mother (Ruth 1:8). In attempting to dissuade them from following her, Naomi recalls the state of her emptiness and hopelessness for the future. She tells her daughters-in-law that she has nothing left to give them. She has no husband for herself, no hope of having another husband for herself, and no sons to give to them as husbands. Essentially Naomi has summarized for Orpah and Ruth, and the reader, what the narrator has already said, which is that Naomi has nothing left. The completeness of Naomi’s lack is further emphasized when Naomi tells the women that she has

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\(^{117}\) Leo Perdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 194.
been cursed: “the Lord’s hand has turned against me” (1:13), revealing that the emptiness has even penetrated her soul. The empty Naomi is in need of chesed. Ruth’s provision of chesed for Naomi initiates the theme of chesed in Ruth, a theme which carries the plot of the story. As Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky observe: “In Ruth, chesed has a domino effect, moving the story from death and despair to the renewal of life and hope.”

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem Ruth goes out to the fields to glean where she catches Boaz’s attention. Boaz begins showing Ruth “favour” (2:10, 13) and “kindness” (2:13) which are uncustomary for an Israelite to show to a foreigner (2:10). Despite Israel’s negative attitude toward Moabites, Boaz approaches Ruth and says, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled” (2:8-9). Without their household head, widows “were more likely than others to be exploited by the unscrupulous and so they needed special protection.” As a widow who was also a Moabite, Ruth’s safety in the fields was twice as precarious, a fact confirmed by Boaz who finds it necessary to personally direct the workers not to harm her (2:9). Without Boaz’s protection, Ruth would be at great risk of being mistreated, and even sexually abused, by the harvesters. But Boaz’s care for Ruth does not stop there.

At meal time Boaz invites Ruth to sit at the same table with him and the harvesters to share their meal. This invitation was likely greatly welcomed by Ruth who had been working in the fields and, as Sakenfeld rightly suggests, “probably had no food with her.” When Ruth had eaten as

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118 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, I.
119 Bendor, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel*, 139-140.
much as she wanted Boaz provides for her even further by telling the harvesters, “let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her” (2:15-16). At the end of the day Ruth returns to Naomi with what she has obtained in Boaz’s field. She comes back with so much that Naomi reacts with, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!” (2:19). That Boaz’s treatment of widows is that of chesed is made evident not only through his kind dialogue with Ruth but also through his abundant provision of food. Boaz’s exceptionally kind conduct first leads Naomi to call him “blessed” (2:19) before describing his behaviour as chesed (2:20). It is not the narrator who tells the reader how great Boaz is, but it is Ruth’s report of Boaz’s actions to Naomi and then Naomi’s declaration. “This internal or embedded evaluation is more authentic and more dramatic than a narrator’s comment.”\textsuperscript{122} The narrator, wanting to emphasize this kindness Boaz had shown to Ruth, first depicts Boaz affording several extravagant kindnesses to a widow. The reader at this point is intended to recognize and understand that it is acts of chesed, acts of extreme and overt kindness, that are the correct response to widows in need. Thus far Boaz has not only protected the widow from harm, provided food for her and her family abundantly, but he also included her at his table, the master’s table, fostering the undoing of her marginalized status.

Naomi however, interested in the permanent undoing of their marginalized status tells Ruth: “My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for” (3:1). At Naomi’s direction, Ruth petitions Boaz saying, “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family” (3:9). According to Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, Ruth asked Boaz “for protection or patronage, without spelling out how Boaz is to

\textsuperscript{122} Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1983), 105.
provide this support. Earlier Boaz prayed that God, under whose wings (kanaf in the plural) she was seeking shelter, would reward Ruth. Here, she is asking him to spread his wings (kanaf) over her, thus inviting him to become God’s agent.”123 Agreeing to end Ruth’s and Naomi’s marginalized and vulnerable status, Boaz, as God’s agent, approaches a nearer kinsman with the purpose of seeing the widows once again included within a bet ‘av unit.

When a nearer kinsman than Boaz is presented with the opportunity of acquiring Elimelech’s land, which would include supporting Naomi,124 he initially agrees, until Boaz introduces the additional obligation of supporting Ruth the Moabite. The nearer kinsman, Hubbard points out, recognized that he would eventually lose his investment in the land “when Ruth’s first child claimed it, presumably without cost, as Elimelech’s heir. Meanwhile that child’s care and feeding would further drain his wealth. Similarly, besides the lost investment in land and child, he may have faced additional expenses in caring for Ruth, other children born to her, and Naomi, too.”125 The nearer-kinsman’s behaviour in refusing is understandable as such costs would endanger his estate (4:6). In response Boaz immediately announced to the elders and the people, “today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife” (4:9-10a). While Boaz had the right to redeem, he was not legally obliged to marry Ruth but chose to, despite being aware, as the nearer kinsman was, of the potential costs and losses.

Perhaps the costs involved motivated Boaz to continue to behave with chesed towards the widowed foreigner Ruth. By purchasing the land and taking Ruth as his wife Boaz not only

123 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, Ruth, 59.
124 Sakenfeld, Ruth, 73.
125 Hubbard, Ruth, 245.
fulfilled a moral and familial obligation, but also fulfilled his role as an agent of God,\textsuperscript{126} by reversing Ruth’s and Naomi’s marginalized status. Where the nearer kinsman focused on the costs, Boaz perhaps saw an opportunity to extend \textit{chesed}. He incorporated the two homeless, landless, childless, and vulnerable widows into his own \textit{bet ‘av}. His actions meant that the widows were no longer outside Israel’s social structure of support; they once again enjoyed the permanency of protection and provision that inclusion in Boaz’s \textit{bet ‘av} afforded. Naomi would once again enjoy the rights to the land of her husband Elimelech, along with its harvest. She could have peace knowing that, through her grandson born to her daughter-in-law Ruth, her family’s \textit{bet ‘av} could eventually be re-established on their ancestral land. For Ruth, marriage to Boaz meant not only that her basic necessities of life had been secured, but that, as the wife of a land owner and prominent community member, she would be granted full social inclusion into the Bethlehemite community, as indicated by the blessing the elders pronounced upon the couple (4:11-12).

Through his acts of \textit{chesed} towards the widows, Boaz was able to lift them out of their oppressed and vulnerable state of poverty, blessing them with the opportunity to live the kind of full and abundant lives, which the Old Testament laws that direct Israel in their treatment of widows envisioned.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{126}Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, \textit{Ruth}, 59.}
3 The Story of Ruth as a Paradigmatic Commentary on the Laws Concerning Widows


First Boaz protects Ruth, a vulnerable widow, from potential harm and possible injustice. As a woman detached from the protection of a bet 'av Ruth was risking abuse and exploitation by entering the harvest fields. As the owner of the field Boaz could have told her to glean in someone else’s field, or he could have exploited her vulnerability and need for food by taking advantage of her, but he does not. When Boaz came to Ruth in the fields he treated her with respect and compassion. His first concern is for her safety. He tells Ruth to stay in his field where she will be safe (2:8-9). In so doing, Boaz exemplifies the law of Exod 22:22-23 which is concerned for the widow’s protection. Boaz not only abstains from taking advantage of her, but also uses his authority to ensure that others treat her well. Boaz thus affords Ruth protection from injustice illustrating the law of Deut 27:19 which stipulates that justice for the widow is not to be withheld.

Second, Boaz made sure Ruth and Naomi were abundantly provided for in terms of food and drink, illustrating the laws of Deut 14:28-29 and 26:12-13. For the widow, gleaning in the fields for long hours would have been exhausting work. Without the necessary food and water to keep up her strength, Ruth’s goal of gleaning enough of the harvest and carrying it back to Naomi for their survival would not have been met. However, in his first conversation with Ruth, Boaz told Ruth that she was free to drink from the water that the workers had drawn (2:9). Then at meal
time Boaz invited Ruth to share in the food of the harvesters, and serves her grain (2:14). When Ruth shared in the meal with the harvesters “she had all she wanted and had some left over” (2:14) and again when she gets home to Naomi, Ruth “had left over after she had eaten enough” (2:18). In both cases the word *sav`a* is used to describe Ruth’s state as being ‘satisfied’. This same word is used in two laws that direct Israel to provide enough food for widows that they “may come and eat and be satisfied” (Deut 14:28-29).

Without Boaz’s generosity, Ruth’s gleaning might not have provided enough to ensure their survival, and the two widows might have had to borrow rations, or money to purchase rations, to see them through. If that were the case they would have had nothing to offer as a pledge except the clothes on their backs. Deut 24:17-18 however commands that a widow’s cloak not be taken as a pledge. Thanks to Boaz’s proactive generous provision of food and water, the widows are not put in a position of having to appeal to a lender or to this law.

If Boaz had done nothing but consent to Ruth’s gleaning in his fields he would have satisfied the minimum requirements of the gleaning law of Deut 24:19-22 which directs land owners to leave behind the produce that was not harvested the first time through, so that there would be food for the widow, among others. But Boaz exceeds the law by having the harvesters leave behind some of the harvested produce for Ruth.

The intent of Deut 16:9-17 which addresses Israel’s treatment of widows is also illustrated through Boaz’s inclusion of Ruth. Widows who were not under the care of a *bet `av*, were on the margins of society, and could therefore easily be forgotten and excluded from community gatherings. Without an invitation to a festival, such as the one in Deut 16 in which “households
were enjoined to include widows,“127 the widow might have voluntarily excluded herself, feeling rejection or humiliation as the law directed that “No one should appear before the Lord empty-handed. Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you” (Deut 16:16-17). The intent of this law’s naming the widow is to place the responsibility of preventing the widow’s communal exclusion upon the community. The intent of this law is illustrated by Boaz in two ways. First, Boaz invited Ruth to join him and his workers in a community meal. Second, by marrying Ruth Boaz goes beyond merely satisfying the law’s concern of community inclusion. As Boaz’s wife, Ruth becomes the matriarch of Boaz’s household and attains full community inclusion, rather than the partial communal inclusion this law required.

Another Old Testament law that is relevant to the story of Ruth and Boaz is Deut 25:5-6, which directed a dead husband’s brother to marry the widow if she has no sons so that the widow may still bear a son to carry on the name of the deceased. Although Boaz was not a brother of Ruth’s husband he seeks out the nearest kinsman and in so doing the concerns of this law, one of which is to secure care for the widow, are satisfied. When the kinsman refuses, Boaz assumes responsibility for providing an heir for Elimelech’s line. Even though the law did not require Boaz to marry Ruth, he fulfilled the moral and familial intent of the law and permanently secured protection and provision for the widows by including them in his bet ‘av.

One legal objection to Boaz’s marrying Ruth is Deut 23:3-6: “No…Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even in the tenth generation… Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live.” One could argue that Boaz is not the model law keeper that he initially seems to be. However, it is precisely this law that makes Boaz an

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even greater example to follow. Assuming Boaz was aware of the laws, he would have had choose between obeying the law that forbade marriage to a Moabite, and the laws that sought the inclusion of widows in the assembly of the Lord and the continuation of Elimelech’s line which meant marrying Ruth. By overlooking the foreignness of Ruth, Boaz courageously risked community chastisement, preferring to prioritize the law that would not only secure Elimelech’s line but would guarantee that the widows Ruth and Naomi were cared for indefinitely as a part of his family.

4 Conclusion

From the moment Boaz meets Ruth his behavior towards this widow becomes exemplary of the Old Testament laws. Boaz’s behaviour towards Ruth not only met, but surpassed the requirements of Old Testament laws which were concerned for the widow’s protection, provision, and inclusion. Richter points to the didactic function of this narrative saying, “From this story we learn that the tribal law of redemption had to do with a patriarch rescuing a family member who, due to crippling life circumstances, had been lost to the kinship circle, to protect their legal rights.”

The book of Ruth portrays the plight of three widows who have limited options for survival. While Orpah went to live with her parents, Ruth joined Naomi in her return to Bethlehem where she would depend on the community’s kindness for her survival. Should the law regarding the treatment of widows been followed to the letter by the community, Naomi and Ruth would likely have survived, but only meagrely.

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Without the protection and provision afforded to those included in a bet 'av the widows had very few options for survival. If the workers in the fields allowed Ruth her rights to glean only in trade for sex, Ruth may have been forced to comply, not only to acquire food for herself, but also because Naomi was depending on her. Boaz however, takes the initiative forbidding his workers from such behaviour, ensuring Ruth is protected from the abuses that might otherwise befall an unprotected Moabite woman gleaning in the fields. In doing so, Boaz exceeds the letter of the law illustrating the behaviour that the law is meant to produce in those under its authority.

A widow alone in a stranger’s field trying to glean enough for two, without food or water, through the heat of the day, would be at risk of becoming too weak to glean, failing to acquire the food necessary for her survival. Boaz however provides Ruth access to water that had already been drawn, access to barley sheaves that had already been harvested, grain that had already been threshed, and a meal that had already been prepared. Again Boaz’s behaviour towards Ruth illustrates the intention of the law which is to ensure that the widow is provided for. In this regard Boaz again exceeds the law as he personally attends to the widow’s lack of sustenance and her arduous task of acquiring food, by abundantly providing for her.

Isolation from the community was also a part of the widow’s plight. Without a familial social structure or a child, the widow would be alone almost all the time. Such social isolation is personally oppressive to one’s overall well-being. As such, there were laws in place that directed Israel to include the widow at various festivals. Boaz addresses Ruth’s aloneness first by including her in a community meal and then by including her in his familial structure of social support by marrying her. Boaz is seen throughout the story, continually and voluntarily extending protection, provision, and inclusion, primarily to Ruth and by extension to Naomi, far beyond any legal obligations or social expectations. His actions show that he is a “model
character dealing faithfully,” as he exemplifies “what chesed looks like.” It is the word chesed which best summarizes Boaz’s behaviour and character with regard to the widows. Thus, as Boaz extends chesed to Ruth and Naomi through the practical means of protection, provision, and inclusion, he acts as God’s agent, illustrating and satisfying the legal concerns of the Torah laws regarding Israel’s treatment of widows.

The book of Ruth provides an important model for Christians wrestling with the question of how to apply Old Testament laws to their own lives. Specifically, it models what Lau calls “a promotion of a generous interpretation of the law, especially as embodied in the actions of Boaz…Within this trajectory, not all the specific requirements of the law must be met; the principle underlying the law is what is crucial.” This underlying principle of the law which has been referred to here as the concern or intent of the law, characterizes well this thesis’ understanding of the law as it is portrayed in biblical narrative.

The book of Ruth portrays the intentions of the laws regarding widows through the acts of Boaz, as he seeks to address the plight of Ruth and Naomi. Christians can follow Boaz’s exemplary behaviour towards marginalized women. While there are widows in Canadian society, there are also divorced women and single parents who, like Ruth, may lack the protection, provision, and social inclusion uniquely found within family. Like Boaz, individual Christians can offer an aged widow protection from those who might recognize and seek to take advantage of her vulnerability through internet or phone scams. Assistance may also be offered to a single parent who is struggling to make ends meet, perhaps by offering to provide child care, or mechanical expertise to make vehicle repairs, or through financial assistance, or by directing them to local

130 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, Ruth, I.
resources of assistance such as a local church or food bank. Like Boaz, Christians can apply the laws of inclusion in their lives by inviting anyone who may be isolated from their family and community, over for coffee, to a church function, or to a sports or book club or into their families. Boaz’s example of generous *chesed* toward the marginalized then, becomes a model for Christians to follow. Whatever actions Christians decide to undertake in their efforts to lift the oppressions of the marginalized in their locale, just as Boaz behaved with *chesed* toward Ruth extending to her a lavish generosity of himself and his resources, so Christians ought to do likewise.
Chapter 4
David and Mephibosheth as a Paradigmatic Narrative of the Laws Concerning Orphans:
2 Samuel 9

The “orphan” or “fatherless” constitute the third group of marginalized often named in Old Testament law as needing special care. In this chapter the Old Testament laws addressing the fatherless will be highlighted and the story of David and Mephibosheth analyzed as it reveals the plight of the orphan in Israelite society and models a response to the marginalized that is worthy of emulation by subsequent readers of the story.

The designations, “orphan” and “fatherless,” in the Old Testament were used not only of those who were parentless, but also of those who had lost a father, but still had a mother. Such children could remain in the household of their deceased father with their widowed mother who “served as a trustee for her children’s inheritance from the dead father until they reached the age of adulthood.”\(^{132}\) Also included under the rubric of orphan and fatherless were “the illegitimate offspring of the various shrine prostitutes; these, with no hope of an inheritance, must have lived a particularly precarious existence.”\(^{133}\) Generally speaking, without a male protector and provider, orphans were vulnerable of being taken advantage of, oppressed, and disregarded and were therefore dependent on the care and generosity of the other households within the community. When they were not embraced by other clan households, orphans would join “the ranks of the destitute, who required charity to survive.”\(^{134}\)

A number of Old Testament narratives flesh out the problems faced by various fatherless figures. When Hagar, Abraham’s concubine, for example, and her son Ishmael are cast out from

\(^{134}\) Leo Perdue, “The Israelite and Early Jewish Family,” 194.
Abraham’s household into the desert, God meets the fatherless pair, becoming a father to them in the desert (Gen 21:9-21). Another example is of Judah and Tamar. Upon discovering that his daughter-in-law Tamar had become pregnant by prostituting herself, Judah immediately orders that she be burned to death, preferring that his presumed “fatherless” grandson be killed along with the mother (Gen 38). A third instance is seen in the way Joseph’s brothers take advantage of their father’s absence in order to mistreat him. Joseph’s brothers are far from their father when Joseph meets them. Taking advantage of Joseph’s brief fatherless status they were able to strip Joseph, throw him into a pit, and sell him as a slave to foreigners (Gen 37:18-36). The laws of the Torah however, did not distinguish between various types of fatherlessness.

The only the word used in the Old Testament to designate those who are orphans or fatherless is yatōm. While this word is not employed in 2 Sam 9 to describe the fatherless Mephibosheth, the reader of 1 and 2 Sam knows that this is the status of Mephibosheth. The larger narrative explicitly states that Saul and his three sons, including Jonathan, were killed in battle (1 Sam 31), before Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth is introduced in 2 Sam 4:1 and then again in 2 Sam 9. In addition to Mephibosheth’s status as fatherless, Mephibosheth is crippled in both feet (2 Sam 4:4). Commenting on Mephibosheth’s status as disabled royalty, Hentrich notes: “Considering that at this time the cultic and profane functions of the king are still united in one person, the impurity restrictions on physically disabled people would most likely still be in force and therefore disqualify Mephibosheth from holding any public office, yet it does not seem to affect ownership of land, even though a disabled person may not be able to work it himself” 135 However, since all the properties of Saul’s bet ‘av were usurped by David (2 Sam 9:7-9), Mephibosheth was not only fatherless, but landless as well. In addition to being without a father, land, or the protection and provision of his family’s bet ‘av, Mephibosheth was disabled. While

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135 Thomas Hentrich, “Disability and Religion,” 75.
the fatherless were socially marginalized and in need of the protection and provision of the bet 'av of others, Mephibosheth was even more in need as his disability prevented him from gleaning for himself, thus making his dependence on the protection and provision of others even more pronounced.

The Torah laws that addressed Israel’s treatment of orphans did not differentiate between one fatherless member of society and another. The laws regarding orphans were to be applied equally regardless of the orphan’s race, religion, or suspected illegitimacy. When the laws concerning the fatherless were ignored, the fatherless were at risk of abandonment, abuse, starvation, and isolation.

1 Torah Laws Regarding Israel’s Treatment of the Orphan

The Torah laws that advocate for the well-being and care for the orphan include: Exod 22:22-23, Deut 10:18, 14:28-29, 16:9-15, 24:17, 24:19-22, 26:12-13, and 27:19. As the following analysis of typical or representative laws will illustrate, the laws that mention orphans are primarily concerned that they are either protected, provided for, or included.

Deut 24:17 for example, which specifically mentions the protection of orphans, instructs Israel: “Do not deprive…the fatherless of justice.” Deut 16:19-20 defines what injustice toward an orphan might look like: “Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the innocent. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you.” As orphans did not have an adult male, or in some cases a household, to protect them from the injustices and
exploitation of a corrupted judicial system, they needed legal protection to ensure fair treatment in court.\[^{136}\] Similarly, Exod 22:22-23 and Deut 27:19 focus on the protection of the orphan.

Other laws concerning the orphan addressed their need of food. Deut 24:19 mandates: “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the…fatherless…so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” This law continues, repeating the same instructions with regards to harvesting olives and grapes, each time naming the orphan, as well as the foreigner and widow, as having the rights to what is left behind. This law not only provided food for the poor, but also protected the dignity of the marginalized as well. Rather than having to beg for food the poor were provided the opportunity to work for their own food like the farmer.\[^{137}\] While serving to maintain the self-respect of the orphan, the primary concern of this law is that the orphan had food to eat. That provision is made for the orphan is also the concern of Deut 10:18, 14:28-29, and 26:12-13.

Deut 16:9-15 addressed the related issue of the social inclusion of orphans. Described in greater detail in the previous chapter with regards to the widow, this law forbade the exclusion or omission of orphans in the Festival of Weeks celebration and ensured that one’s fatherless status did not prevent communal participation. A number of Old Testament narratives feature those excluded from communal participation. Jephthah was excluded from his father’s household, for example, due his mother’s status as a prostitute (Judg 11:1-3). Hannah’s sense of exclusion at the annual celebration at Shiloh was due to her barrenness and the ridicule she endured from Peninnah (1 Sam 1:1-20). Finally, the expulsion of non-Jewish wives and their half Jewish


children under Ezra (Ezra 10), attests to the fact that status was a determining factor regarding a person’s experience within community.

2 The Narrative of David and Mephibosheth:  
An Analysis

2.1 Use of Repetition and the Narrative Context of 2 Samuel 9

The narrative of 2 Sam 9 does not stand alone as a story, but is one component of the larger story of the life of King David. Scholars often divide the narrative of David’s life into four blocks, the history and rise of David (1 Sam 16 – 2 Sam 5 and perhaps 7-8), the ark narrative (1 Sam 4-6 and 2 Sam 6), the succession narrative (2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kgs 1-2), and the appendices (2 Sam 21-24). The story of David’s life however, includes a subplot which contrasts the kingship of Saul and David. This subplot is carried forward first by the relationship and rivalry of David and Saul, second by the friendship of David and Saul’s son Jonathan, and third by David’s relationship with Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth. The third part of this subplot, beginning in 1 Sam 20, is given the greatest attention in 2 Sam 9, and concludes in 2 Sam 21. It is further tied together through the theme of chesed which is maintained by the narrator’s use of the literary device of repetition.

In 1 Sam 20 Jonathan asks David to make the following promise: “show me the chesed of Yahweh as long as I live, so that I may not be killed, and do not ever cut off your chesed from my family — not even when the Lord has cut off every one of David’s enemies from the face of the earth” (1 Sam 20:14-15). David consents to this promise which is later restated by Jonathan:

139 While chapters 7 and 8 are lacking from these blocks, Antony Campbell suggests that they form the conclusion to the first block, the rise of David. (Campbell, 2 Samuel, 4).
140 Anderson, 2 Samuel, xxvi.
“Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 
‘The Lord is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants 
forever’” (1 Sam 20:42). While David promises to extend *chesed* directly to Jonathan and his 
family, Jonathan seems careful to specify that this promise is to extend to his descendants as 
well. Jonathan’s calling on David twice to show his descendants *chesed* is, as Younger states, 
“expressive of the deep and abiding loyalty and commitment between the parties of that 
covenant…a voluntary act of extraordinary mercy and generosity going beyond the call of 
duty.”141 The repeated use of the word *chesed* here on the lips of Jonathan not only serves to 
emphasize the kind of loyalty he was looking for from David, but also serves as a literary device 
to create suspense in the reader. Can the house of David and the house of Jonathan remain truly 
allied? Will David keep this covenant of *chesed* when he becomes king, and if so, how?

The narrator again alludes to the promise in 2 Sam 4:4 when, after the deaths of Saul and 
Jonathan, one of Saul’s sons Ish-Bosheth is murdered by men loyal to David, David is 
displeased. It is here the narrator makes the important aside that Jonathan had a son named 
Mephibosheth “who was lame in both feet” (2 Sam 4:4) and thus reminds the reader of the 
promise David made to Jonathan creating a narrative tension as to whether David will show to 
Jonathan’s descendants an “unfailing kindness like the Lord’s kindness” (1 Sam 20:14). The 
narrator returns to main plot line and in 2 Sam 9, the *chesed* theme again rises and the 
anticipation of the reader is satisfied.

When David is firmly established as the undisputed king by the end of chapter 8, his first words 
are: “Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show *chesed*”142 for Jonathan’s 

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141 Lawson Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 
142 See previous chapter for a full discussion of the meaning of *chesed*. 
sake?” (1 Sam 9:1). Three times in chapter 9 the word *chesed* is repeated, and all three times by David. The second time David repeats the word he directs the question to Ziba, who once served Saul, saying, “Is there no one still alive from the house of Saul to whom I can show God’s *chesed*?” (9:3). A comparison of this second occurrence of *chesed* in the phrase “God’s *chesed*” (9:3) with the phrase “*chesed* of Yahweh” (1 Sam 20:14) further establishes the narrative and thematic link between David’s oath with Jonathan and this one with Mephibosheth.\(^{143}\) In the third instance, David states: “I will surely show you *chesed* for the sake of your father Jonathan” (9:7). As Licht suggests in Old Testament stories such as this, “one usually finds some logical link between events and the repeated words.”\(^{144}\) This is certainly true in 1 Sam 9:7 where David repeats *chesed* for the third time, and describes to Mephibosheth the *chesed* that he will be extending to him. Here the crippled orphan Mephibosheth, Saul’s grandson, becomes the object of David’s *chesed* in fulfillment of the promise that David made to Jonathan.

David extends four acts of *chesed* to Mephibosheth, the first being implied by the narrator, the next three being explicitly stated by David. In the first act of *chesed* David spares Mephibosheth’s life. While the text does not explicitly note that David’s sparing of Mephibosheth’s life was an act of *chesed*, it is implied. Even though Mephibosheth most likely would have been disqualified from becoming king due to his disability “he could be regarded as a potential enemy, especially when Micah (Mephibosheth’s son) grew older.”\(^{145}\) In its historical context, this narrative stands at a time when mercilessness was the standing treatment for deposed royal houses as prescribed by the current regime. Thus Mephibosheth’s bowing down to pay David honour is explained: “to be summoned from a remote place of refuge to the

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\(^{145}\) Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 143.
usurper’s presence – for so Saul’s family would view David – would hardly invite confidence.”\textsuperscript{146} David’s response of chesed was therefore, as Anderson suggests, “an act of kindness and conciliating since the latter had no bargaining power.”\textsuperscript{147} David’s promise to Jonathan would have been fulfilled when he allowed Mephibosheth to live. What is unexpected however are the further acts of kindness David extends to Jonathan’s descendant.

David’s second chesed act is stated explicitly in the text in restoring to Mephibosheth everything that had belonged to Saul and his family (9:7). The third is of David’s reserving a permanent place at the king’s table for Mephibosheth (9:7). The fourth is David’s making Ziba and his family the servants of Mephibosheth. David says to Ziba, “You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master’s grandson may be provided for” (9:10). The result of the chesed of David is that Mephibosheth’s life is spared, he has a home in Jerusalem, he has been lifted from poverty to wealth and, securing the well-being of his family, he now eats at the kings table and has been made “as one of the king’s sons” (9:11). David’s almost excessive kindness to Mephibosheth is used by the narrator as proof positive of the correctness of God’s choice of David as Israel’s king.

A further incident involving the orphan Mephibosheth is found in 2 Sam 16 where Ziba accuses Mephibosheth of treason telling David that Mephibosheth has laid claim to the former kingdom of Saul. Initially David believed Ziba’s report turning all that he had given to Mephibosheth over to Ziba. However, in response to Mephibosheth’s later denial of Ziba’s claim David divides the lands between the two, choosing to err on the side of mercy (2 Sam 19:24-30).\textsuperscript{148} Here Mephibosheth summarizes David’s acts of chesed saying, “My lord the king is like an angel of

\textsuperscript{147} Anderson, 2 Samuel, 143.
God… All my grandfather’s descendants deserved nothing but death from my lord the king, but you gave your servant a place among those who eat at your table” (19:27b-28a).

The final incident of this subplot is taken up in chapter 21. In order to make restitution for Saul’s attempted genocide of the Gibeonites, David consents to the Gibeonites’ request to have “seven men of his (Saul’s) sons” (21:6) handed over to them for execution. Even though David chooses seven grandsons of Saul to hand over, “the king spared Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, because of the oath before the Lord between David and Jonathan son of Saul” (21:7). The oath that David made with Jonathan to show chesed to his family is again highlighted by the narrator as being persistently maintained by David.

Through the repetition of the word chesed, through David’s corresponding acts of chesed, and through the words of Jonathan’s descendant, the narrator not only confirms that David has indeed kept his oath by being to Mephibosheth as “an angel of God” (2 Sam 19:27b), but he also establishes David as a king who exhibits god-like chesed.

### 2.2 Characters: David and Mephibosheth in 2 Sam 9

The account of David's rise to power is extensive. 2 Sam 5 tells of Israel’s pledge of loyalty to David (5:1-3), of David’s becoming king (5:3), his capture of Jerusalem (5:7), and how “he became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him” (5:10). In chapter 6 David moves the ark to Jerusalem making it his new home as well as Israel’s centre of worship. David and his descendants are then further established in chapter 7 as God’s chosen royal line, and then chapter 8 gives account of David’s conquests and his reign “over all Israel,…(as he did) what was just and right for all his people” (8:15). The reader is reminded that Yahweh has cut off David’s enemies and recalls Jonathan’s earlier words, “do not ever cut
off your kindness from my family—not even when the Lord has cut off every one of David’s enemies from the face of the earth” (1 Sam 20:15).\textsuperscript{149} Thus the narrator has prepared the way for David to keep the oath he made with Jonathan.\textsuperscript{150}

David’s states his concern to show chesed to Saul’s house three times followed immediately by four acts of chesed. The oath that was made between David and Jonathan was made privately, and so if David had conveniently chosen to forget or ignore the oath he had made no one would know. But David shows himself to be a man of his word and a God fearer as he knows that God had heard this oath. David also acts like a benevolent king, who at the height of his power, grants a godly mercy and kindness to Saul’s grandson and therefore potential enemy, Mephibosheth.

Just as Saul’s son Jonathan was in line for the throne, so too Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, would have been in line for the throne. Mephibosheth was only five years old when his father and grandfather died (2 Sam 4:4) leaving him orphaned. Until he is summoned to Jerusalem by David, Mephibosheth lived under the care of Machir in Lo-debar, where he apparently married, as he had a son, Micah (9:12). Even though Mephibosheth was an adult at the time he is summoned by David, he was still fatherless and without an inheritance and therefore still dependent on the kindness of Machir, not only for his survival, but for the survival of his wife and son as well.

\textsuperscript{149} Bill T. Arnold, \textit{1 & 2 Samuel}, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 506.

\textsuperscript{150} Arnold, \textit{1 & 2 Samuel}, 506.
3 The David and Mephibosheth Narrative as a Paradigmatic Commentary on the Laws Concerning Orphans

When David summons the orphan Mephibosheth he grants to him four acts of *chesed* in the forms of protection, provision, and inclusion, and these acts model the intent of Torah laws that address Israel’s treatment of the fatherless, or orphans. First, David abstains from killing Mephibosheth, second, David returns to Mephibosheth all that belonged to Saul, third, David grants him a place at the kings table, and fourth, David provides servants to cultivate and harvest Mephibosheth’s new lands. Through these acts David not only models the kind of behaviour that the laws intend to incite, which is caring for the orphan, but also supersedes the intentions of these laws.

3.1 Sparing the Lives of Mephibosheth and Micah

When 2 Sam 9 opens David is the firmly established as the God ordained king of Israel. As custom dictated that David would get rid of all rivals to his throne, the execution of Mephibosheth and Micah would have been anticipated, but David’s oath changed everything. Instead of killing Mephibosheth and Micah he offered them the kind of treatment that satisfies the concern of Exod 22:22-23.

David’s protection of Mephibosheth from the customary mistreatment expected from a new king also satisfies the concern of the laws of Deut 24:17 and 27:19 which stipulate that orphans be afforded justice. As Mephibosheth had committed no other crime but being born into Saul’s

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family, any mistreatment of him by David would have been an injustice. As it was however, David abstained from mistreating him and so protected him from injustice. By sparing their lives and abstaining from mistreating Mephibosheth and Micah, David acts contrary to tradition and in doing so not only fulfills his oath to Jonathan, but becomes a model of Old Testament laws concerning the treatment of orphans.

3.2 Granting Mephibosheth Land and Servants

David not only treated Mephibosheth justly, he provided for him generously by returning to him everything that was Saul’s, restoring Mephibosheth’s inheritance, thereby removing Mephibosheth and his son Micah from their generational dependence upon Machir. David gives everything to Mephibosheth including Saul’s lands and servants so that he “may be provided for” (2 Sam 9:10). In doing so he satisfies the legal concerns regarding the fatherless in Deut 14:28-29 and 26:12-13; which stipulated that provision be made through a tithe of the harvest. This provision was made for “nonlanded people” such as Mephibosheth, who had no inheritance of land in Israel. The purpose of the provision of tithe was so that the fatherless may come and eat until they are “satisfied” (Deut 14:29; 26:12). Through David’s provision of land and of servants to work the land and gather the harvest, David shows, and thus illustrates, the same concern for Mephibosheth as these laws, which is that the fatherless was “provided for” (2 Sam 9:10).

3.3 Reserving Mephibosheth a Place at the King’s Table

The concern for the fatherless in the law of Deut 16:9-15 was to guard against their exclusion. This law specifically names the Feast of Weeks celebration in which the fatherless were to be

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ensured inclusion. While there is no evidence that Mephibosheth was ever a part of this feast, he was ensured inclusion in a family as he was included in Machir's household. David, however, offered Mephibosheth a lavish life, reserving a place at the king’s table for him, treating him “like one of the king’s sons” (2 Sam 9:12). Thus inclusion at the highest level in the kingdom ensured Mephibosheth’s inclusion in all communal and cultic gatherings. While Machir is portrayed as observing the law by caring for the fatherless, David is presented by the narrator as a model character who exceeds the requirements of the law, which is what acts of chesed do.

4 Conclusion

In the ancient Near East, it was customary for the usurping king to kill off threats to the throne. In response to an oath David made to Jonathan, Mephibosheth is permitted to live. This act of great kindness was the first of many offered to Mephibosheth and his son which satisfied the concern of the laws that stipulate the protection of orphans.

David not only protected Mephibosheth but he also provided for him, by granting the fatherless Mephibosheth land and servants. Such provision for Mephibosheth illustrates the concern of the Old Testament laws that the fatherless are provided with basic necessities of life. David however does much more for Mephibosheth. His generosity qualifies as a chesed kindness.

Finally David includes Mephibosheth at the king’s table where he becomes like family. By protecting, providing, and including him, David satisfies the concern of the laws that address Israel’s treatment of orphans, and in doing so illustrates for the reader the intent of those laws.

The story of David and Mephibosheth then can be viewed as a commentary on Old Testament laws regarding the treatment of the fatherless. The story provides an exceptional example of generosity and chesed being offered to an orphan, albeit a highly privileged king's son.
Mephibosheth was not a typical orphan and outsider but one who was also disabled making him particularly dependent upon the care of others for his well-being. Neither Mephibosheth’s status as a potential enemy, nor his status as an orphan, or his disability, prevented king David, from reaching out to him with *chesed*.

In this way, the story has potential for offering modern readers a paradigm for the care of the marginalized who fall into the broader category of “fatherless.” Whether persons are without both parents, or without one parent, or whether a person has parents who are or have been largely absent, or abusive, or whether like Mephibosheth, have a disability, Christians have the responsibility of providing care.

The need for providing care for those who are literally or virtually “fatherless” in Canada is demonstrated by the success and growth of organizations such as Breakfast Clubs of Canada which, in Ontario alone, went from serving breakfast to 32764 students in 2009/10 to 52575 students in 2010/11. The Breakfast Club’s website states that one in ten, or 637000 Canadian children live in poverty and are at risk of starting their day without breakfast.\(^1\) Other groups that demonstrate the continued need for such care in Canada also include Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, Christian Horizons, and War Amps of Canada. By participating in organizations such as these Christians have the opportunity to become the king Davids of society by extending great kindnesses to various Mephibosheths, helping those who are vulnerable, and in need of protection, provision, and inclusion, thereby applying the Old Testament laws in their lives.

Chapter 5
Conclusion

Each of the laws in the Torah that instruct Israel’s treatment of their socially marginalized stipulates that Israel protect, provide for, or include them. This thesis has shown that as Jethro, Boaz, and David tendered protection, provision, and inclusion to Moses, Ruth and Mephibosheth respectively, they satisfied the concerns ensconced in the laws that directed Israel as to how to care for the foreigner, widow, and orphan among them.

When the Midianite Jethro met Moses he protected him by not taking advantage of his vulnerable status as a ger or foreigner. Moreover, Jethro took Moses into his home and provided him with food, shelter, and a place in the Midianite community. By extending such hospitality to a stranger Jethro behaved with righteousness.\textsuperscript{154} In addition, by giving his daughter to Moses as his wife, Jethro made Moses part of his very own family. In this way Jethro extended protection, provision, and inclusion to the highest degree of which he was capable, loving the foreigner Moses as himself (Lev 19:34). He therefore modelled the intention of the Old Testament laws about the stranger.

The narrative of Boaz and Ruth similarly provides a commentary on Old Testament laws concerning widows. It features Boaz who modelled the kind of care for widows mandated in Old Testament law when he showed chesed to the widow Ruth and by extension to Naomi. Boaz protected Ruth by making sure she was safe directing his men to watch out for her also. He provided for her present and future physical needs by including her in the community meal and having the harvesters leave harvested grain behind for Ruth and Naomi. Finally, when Boaz married Ruth, nullifying her risk of poverty and communal isolation he also brought Naomi

\textsuperscript{154} Turner, Genesis, 84.
under his shelter. Ruth becomes part of a family, finding full inclusion in her new Bethlehemite community. Boaz’s care for Ruth is described in the narrative as *chesed*, which is a godly characteristic. As Younger suggests: “The manner of caring, committing, initiating, and responding that Boaz demonstrates in the concept of ‘doing *chesed’’ becomes the definition of responsible human behaviour.” It is through this god-like kindness, or *chesed* behaviour, that Boaz becomes illustrative of the concerns of the laws regarding widows by extending to Ruth protection, provision, and inclusion at the most generous levels, thereby imitating godliness as God’s agent.

David’s treatment of the fatherless Mephibosheth also demonstrates Torah law through benevolent acts, which this narrative also defines as *chesed*. In the ancient Near Eastern culture new kings would eliminate those considered a threat to the throne. Yet in this narrative David surprises Mephibosheth by showing him *chesed* in a number of ways. First he allows him to live, by protecting him from the death or at least the banishment that would otherwise befall a person in prince Mephibosheth’s position. David then provides land and servants to Mephibosheth ensuring that he and his son are cared for. David also reserves a place for Mephibosheth at the king’s table treating him as one of his own sons. David uses his power to restore to Mephibosheth, not only the lands and servants he would have inherited, but in addition, his status as a prince in Israel. Thus through David’s *chesed* protection, provision, and inclusion of Mephibosheth this narrative becomes illustrative, not only of the laws that are concerned with the well-being of orphans, but also of what those laws look like when exceeded.

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This *chesed* that David showed to Mephibosheth, or that humans show to one another, is as Younger notes, “among the most fitting means God can use to display his own *chesed*.”

In each of these narratives the hero is seen demonstrating character qualities that are characteristic of God. Jethro affords generous hospitality to the foreigner Moses which demonstrates righteousness, before showing him a love that is usually reserved for family by making Moses his own son and family. Boaz offers the widowed foreigner Ruth *chesed* through personally risky yet extravagant acts of care and kindness through personal risk to himself, and then redeeming her, gives himself to her in marriage. David also shows *chesed* to the fatherless Mephibosheth through a benevolence and generosity that exceeds all expectations and which culminates in Mephibosheth’s becoming as one of David’s own sons. In all three instances it is having and behaving with characteristics of godliness extended towards the marginalized that satisfies the intent of the laws of the socially marginalized foreigner, widow, or orphan. In each case demonstrating godliness culminated in the permanent security for those in need, providing an answer to the volatility of their lives. Each can also require personal sacrifice. Jethro took Moses as a son becoming his father, Boaz redeemed Ruth as a wife becoming her husband, and David brought Mephibosheth into his house as one of his own sons becoming to him like a father.

This kind of giving of oneself for the sake of another who is in peril is demonstrated by God when he rescued Israel from Egypt and then covenanted with them in the giving of the law at Sinai. It is also the kind of giving demonstrated by Jesus who according to the Gospels gave himself for the world so that all may be saved (John 3:16). It follows that as one exhibits the godly characteristics of righteousness, redemption, love, and *chesed*, through the tangible and

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159 Younger Jr., *Judges/Ruth*, 396.
generous administration of protection, provision, and inclusion towards the marginalized, one not only satisfies the intents of the Old Testament laws of the socially marginalized, but exceeds them.

1 Satisfying the Concerns of the Laws

God’s intention for his people is that they imitate him. As the Mount Sinai narrative attests, God’s law is reflective of his character. The law provided God’s people with an ethical compass, or moral benchmark, to direct them towards behaviours and lifestyles that would emanate his character. Side by side with the laws in the Old Testament canon are stories which illustrate what using the laws as a basis for directing ones behaviour and lifestyle toward imitating God looks like.

Neither Jethro, Boaz, nor David set out to fulfill the laws of the foreigner, widow, and orphan, respectively and yet they are portrayed satisfying the concerns of the laws. These narrative examples that illustrate the laws of the socially marginalized being lived out through the practical applications of protection, provision, and inclusion are not unique in the scriptures of the Bible. In Gen 19:1-6 Lot meets two strangers to whom he affords protection, provision, and inclusion. In 2 Kings 4:8-17 a prominent Shunammite woman gives protection, provision, and inclusion to the wandering prophet Elisha. In addition, the Old Testament contains many examples of God modelling care for the marginalized. As Israel suffers from slavery, oppression, and exile, God provides for them as he would for a ger, widow or orphan.
2 Legal Narrative Paradigms Continued in the New Testament

Narratives that illustrate the laws of the socially marginalized are not limited to the Old Testament. In discussion with Jesus about the meaning of the command in Lev 19:18, “Love your neighbour as yourself” a legal expert asks Jesus “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29). Jesus does not answer with a definition of the word neighbour, but instead tells a story about an injured man in need of help and three others who came across his path. Jesus describes the actions of the first two as ignoring the man’s need and the Samaritan’s as affording protection, provision, and inclusion to the injured man that goes far beyond the care that would normally or culturally be expected. When Jesus asked the expert in the law which of the three men he thought behaved neighbourly, he answered the one who showed mercy. Rather than entering into a legal debate with this legal expert about who qualifies as a neighbour and who does not, Jesus tells a story, enabling the hearers of this story to draw their own conclusions. With the legal expert’s question answered, this narrative could have ended, but instead Jesus commanded: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

In the Luke 10 narrative, Jesus does not define who qualified as a neighbour and who did not because that is not the concern of the law under discussion. The concern of the law “love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev 19:18) is that people render the protection, provision, and inclusion to those they become aware of who require their help. They must do everything that is in their power to ensure that the other is treated with a generous abundance of care, even if at great personal expense. The story of the good Samaritan was meant to teach the legal expert and all readers of this gospel how to obey the command to love your neighbour as yourself; they are to: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).
The gospel also reveals that Jesus modeled the ethical behaviour the law mandated. Specifically, he afforded protection, provision, and inclusion to others. By healing the sick Jesus protected others from their illnesses (Luke 4:38-44). By feeding the multitudes, he provided food to those who had none as they were far from home (Matt 14:13). By associating with those who were virtual orphans, having been cast out by their families or communities, he provided for their need for inclusion and community (Matt 7:26-30; 9:9; 15:21).

3 The Narratives and the Law

In each of the Old Testament narratives discussed in this thesis the concerns of the laws of the foreigner, the widow, and the fatherless are satisfied. The narratives do not accomplish this through a rigorous step-by-step process, but rather by illustrating the protection, provision, and inclusion of the foreigner Moses, the widow Ruth, and the fatherless Mephibosheth. Each narrative does more than just satisfy the requirements of the law, rather each exceeds them, which was always the intention of the law in the first place.

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. makes an important point with regards to the nature of biblical legal materials. He says that they “do not offer a comprehensive legal code which covers every imaginable case. Rather, they constitute instructions about sample or crucial topics from which inferences, about all other cases are to be drawn. Their goal is more to inculcate Israel’s fundamental value system in its people than to provide handy legal references for judicial bodies.”160 While the intention of the law may be to instruct behaviour, legal lists of dos and don’ts on their own have not proven to be particularly successful when it comes to influencing or motivating concrete change in people’s behaviour.

Curt Thompson suggests that change in our own lives can occur when we allow God’s story to traverse our own. He says, “When we tell our stories or listen to another person’s story, our left and right modes of processing integrate. This is why simply reading the Ten Commandments as a list of dos and don’ts has so little efficacy…Isolating commands for right living apart from their storied context is at best neurologically nonintegrating and, at worst, disintegrating.”\(^{161}\)

And perhaps that is why so much of the Bible is taken up with stories, which, when rightly interpreted, foster the efficacy and influence of the laws in our lives.

Tremper Longman III agrees that biblical narratives are designed to have an effect on a reader’s ethical behaviour. As an example he points to the Genesis 39 story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. He writes: “In this chapter Joseph is a virtual embodiment of the many proverbs that explicitly teach that young men should resist the advances of the strange and adulterous woman.”\(^{162}\) The proper response to this Genesis story, Longman III concludes, is “a chaste character on the part of the reader.”\(^{163}\)

Gordon J. Wenham, in arguing for the didactic purpose of the Old Testament storytellers as aiming to impart not only theological truths and ethical ideals, says, “the Bible storytellers are not advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify.”\(^{164}\) Thus, the model characters in the biblical narratives are not portrayed obeying the laws in checklist fashion fulfilling every requirement to the letter of every law. Rather, they

\(^{161}\) Curt Thomas, *Anatomy of the Soul* (Carrollton, TX: Tyndale House, 2010), 150.

\(^{162}\) Longman III, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretations*, 70.

\(^{163}\) Longman III, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretations*, 70.

model a realistic response to the demands of the law and therefore are realistic paradigmatic figures.

With regards to the biblical narratives and their referenced legal material, Hubbard adds, “the value of such texts exceeds their simple, procedural detail; rather, they are mirrors of Israel’s treasured values.”\(^{165}\) It was to these narrative mirrors of Torah values that this thesis turned, observing how the legal requirements concerning the foreigner, widow, and orphan might be realized.

4 The Laws and The Church

If Jesus did not try to fulfill to the letter every law of the Torah, then neither should his followers. Jesus’ earthly existence as recorded in the gospels remains an undisputed model for Christian living and behaviour. Not that Christians should imitate Jesus by living in the wilderness without food for forty days or by being nailed to a cross; rather they should emulate and imitate his character. However, many Christians also believe that the Old Testament laws have value for Christian living and behaviour and just as Jethro, Boaz, David, and Jesus satisfied the concerns of the laws of the socially marginalized by affording protection, provision, and inclusion, so the Christian can also observe the laws of the Torah that concern the socially marginalized.

It can be argued that Torah laws or perhaps their intent are as integral and authoritative as the New Testament is for Christians, and are therefore to be of great concern to the Christian. The narratives discussed in this thesis stand as models for Christians of how to apply the laws of the socially marginalized in their own lives. The laws are not intended to be obeyed in a legalistic manner given that our cultural contexts are so different, but when understood in their context

\(^{165}\) Hubbard, *Ruth*, 50.
Old Testament laws are the starting place of godly behaviour. The narratives of Jethro and the foreigner Moses, of Boaz and the widow Ruth, and of David and the fatherless Mephibosheth, illustrate to readers of any age and culture what the concerns are of the laws regarding the foreigners, widows, and fatherless. They function as standards for Christians. They suggest that Christians should provide protection, provision, and inclusion to anyone who requires such care. To limit one’s kindnesses to those who specifically fit the definition of a foreigner, widow, or orphan, would satisfy only the minimum requirements of the law and its letter. As Wenham states: “Ethics is much more than keeping the law…righteousness involves more than living by the Decalogue and the other laws…the laws thus tend to express the limits of socially acceptable behaviour: they do not describe ideal behaviour.”\textsuperscript{166} Thus for the Christian, the laws of the marginalized represent the baseline for ethical behaviour. The upper limits of ethical behaviour are modelled by God whose indefinite kindnesses are attested to throughout the Bible, and exemplified by Jethro’s bringing Moses into his family as a son, Boaz’s redeeming of Ruth as his wife, and David’s becoming as a father to Mephibosheth.

The Old Testament narratives thus demonstrate to the Christian that the laws are not intended to be obeyed to their letter as the Theonomist view advocates. It is impossible for a Christian who lives in an apartment building to leave gleanings in a field, or for a Christian to extend an invitation to the Festival of Weeks celebration, or for a Christian to marry a widowed relative. Striving to successfully obey the letter of the laws of the socially marginalized is not only an improbable feat but also represents a failure to understand the role of the law in Scripture.

Neither are the laws, as the Dispensational view maintains, for Israel’s use only. Since the laws originated from the Lord (Exod 20), they are an expression of God’s personhood, and therefore

\textsuperscript{166} Wenham, \textit{Story as Torah}, 80.
a valuable means by which all those who follow the Lord may come to know who he is, what he is like, and what the minimal ethical behavioural expectations are for his people. Since the law is a part of the scriptures of the Church, this holds especially true for Christians.

Unlike the Theonomist and Dispensational views, the middle approach to the Old Testament laws is fluid and open ended. It values Old Testament laws and views them as a useful guide for the community of faith. For the people of God the law is but a starting place for understanding what protection, provision, and inclusion means for those in need. The narratives flesh out what fulfilment of the laws of the marginalized can look like and help Christians learn to emulate the character of God. They provide inspiring examples for them to follow and imitate. With regard to the laws of the marginalized, Christians can extend abundant protection, provision, and inclusion to those in need of such care. Their own lives then can demonstrate to others God’s character and model what the laws of the socially marginalized look like when applied.

The renewed interest in Old Testament ethics and the question of how the Church uses Old Testament laws specifically, have opened up many questions deserving examination. This thesis has explored the usefulness of intertextual dialogues between Old Testament laws regarding the marginalized and Old Testament narratives featuring the marginalized. It has shown that the Old Testament itself contains examples of what it means to live out the Old Testament laws in tangible ways. These narratives provide an underused resource for Christians, teaching them what it means to fulfill Old Testament laws, or to use the analogy of Jesus’ use of the story of the good Samaritan, the stories model the go-and-do-likewise mandate Jesus gave to the man who asked “Who is my neighbour?”
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